SPRING 2024

THE BOOK OF JAMES

Living God's Way in God's World

Alliance Bible Fellowship
College Connection

COLLEGE CONNECTION
SPRING 2024

Greetings Small Group Hosts & Co-Leaders!!

Welcome to a new semester of Small Group ministry together! This semester is going to be an amazing journey together as we study the very practical, yet deeply theological NT book of James. This book is so helpful when it comes to applying important theological principles to everyday situations in life. In many ways, James brings us to that "rubber meets the road" point in Christian living. We believe this study will benefit your Christian journey in many ways.

Having spent the fall semester in the OT book of 1 Samuel, we will be jumping into our time machines to fast forward nearly 1200 years as we study James. The reason for this quantum leap is that we want students to encounter the whole counsel of God's Word. Studying an OT narrative is very different from studying a NT epistle. It is our hope that this study will guide you through the unique characteristics of an epistle and you will walk away understanding how to engage this critical genre of the Bible.

This leader guide is intended to resource you as facilitators of this study. Your role is *not* to be the "Bible Answer Man/Woman," but rather, to encourage two important aspects of small group Bible study: discovery and discussion. We hope you will keep these foremost in your mind as you lead your groups. Our goal is for students to discover the truth of God's Word through guided study questions and, in turn, discuss it together as a group, leading to rich life transformation.

In this leader guide, you will find study resources and scheduling plans to hopefully answer your questions about the semester ahead. If you have any questions, as always, please feel free to reach out and we'll do all we can to assist you.

Finally, we would like to say a special thank you to each of you who host and/or co-lead one of our small groups! This ministry would absolutely not have the impact it does without your energy, effort, and love for the Lord and the students He has given us. You are an invaluable resource to this church and to the Kingdom of Christ! It is a joy to hear stories of how God is using you to bless college students week in and week out.

Blessings on your group!

College Ministry Team
Alliance Bible Fellowship

Studying James
CC – Spring 2024

Welcome to Spring 2024 and our study of the book of James! It's going to be an exciting semester of discovery and discussion in God's Word together. In this training, we will cover a number of important points that will prepare our students to engage with God's Word. It is also our hope that the following information will prove helpful to you as a group leader as well. On that note – thank you so much for your faithful investment in the lives of our students and in Christ's Kingdom work. Let's dive in!

<u>Why study the book of James?</u>

One of the best Bible teachers today, Alistair Begg, has a radio teaching ministry called *Truth for Life*. When the program opens, the narrator begins by saying, "Truth for life…*where the learning is for living.*" That little tagline is spot on! The real point of God speaking to man through His Word is so that we'll learn who He is, and in turn, our learning *about* Him would translate to truly living *for* Him! This is the essence of the book of James – practical to the core, but rooted in the very nature of God Himself. This book covers key themes such as joy in trials, facing temptations, the sin of favoritism, how we use our words, and many others! But it all comes back to the essence of real faith!

<u>What is the goal of this study?</u>

You can study *any* book of the Bible from various angles and glean certain takeaways based on your particular reason for studying. Our specific goal for this study is to discover the essence of REAL FAITH. When we face times of testing and temptation – when we're making plans for the future – when we need wisdom to navigate a tricky turn in life… *what difference does our Christian faith really make?* We hope by the end of this study you will be able to give an answer to this important question!

Introductory Matters

There are many good Bible book overviews out there to consult. A few I'd recommend include:

- The Message of the NT (Mark Dever); The Bible from 30,000 Feet (Skip Heitzig); MacArthur Study Bible or MacArthur Bible Commentary; Wiersbe Bible Commentary (good outline and simple summaries); ESV or CSB Study Bibles.

Outline[1]

I. Greeting (1:1)
II. The Testing of Faith (1:2-18)
III. Hearing and Doing the Word (1:19-27)
IV. The Sin of Partiality (2:1-13)
V. Faith without Works is Dead (2:14-26)
VI. Taming the Tongue (3:1-12)
VII. Wisdom from Above (3:13-18)
VIII. Warning against Worldliness (4:1-12)
IX. Boasting about Future Plans (4:13-17)
X. Trusting in Riches (5:1-6)
XI. Patience in Suffering (5:7-12)
XII. Praying in Faith (5:13-20)

Helpful Timeline of Important Dates[2] *[all dates are A.D.]*

- 33 – Death, resurrection of Christ
- 33 – James, brother of Jesus, becomes a believer
- 36/37 – James sees Paul in Jerusalem
- 40-45 – James writes his letter[3]
- 48-49 – Apostolic Council in Jerusalem[4]
- 57 – Paul visits James in Jerusalem
- 62 – James is martyred for his faith

Title

The book (of letter) of James is considered a *general epistle*. Typically this means there is no specific audience addressed. However, in 1:1, we find James addressing the twelve tribes in the Dispersion. We will discuss the meaning of the term *dispersion* later, but for now, know that James's audience was much wider than the NT epistles written to specific congregations in various cities.

Author

The early church was in agreement that James, the half-brother of Jesus, is the author of this letter.[5] This is amazing, considering he did not believe his brother to be the Messiah

[1] Portions of this outline are taken from the ESV Study Bible (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 2389-2390.
[2] ESV Study Bible, p. 2389.
[3] Some commentators, such as MacArthur, have James writing his letter around 44-49.
[4] James was a key figure at this council. As an elder of the church in Jerusalem, he supported Paul's teaching of salvation by grace through faith, rather than requiring grace + circumcision.
[5] Robert L. Plummer, *James*, vol. XII, ESV Expository Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 221.

initially! It is also significant because the testimony of those living at the time of writing would have firsthand knowledge of the letter's origin and be able to vouch for its authenticity.

One of the confusing issues surrounding the authorship of this book is the fact that there were four, perhaps five, key figures in the early church named James![6] However, based on the content, style, and timing of the letter (which all matched an author from the Jewish Christian Church), we are confident that Jesus' half-brother authored the letter.

James's authorship brings up another interesting matter as well. In the introduction to his letter, James never attempts any sort of "name-dropping," as if he were trying to impress readers that he could've shared a room with the Messiah growing up. In fact, his introduction is simple, humbled, and genuinely convinced of his brother's Messiahship. We see this in the way he refers to himself in 1:1 as "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ." You would have to be fairly convinced of your brother's deity to call yourself his servant! This is exactly what James does here.

James played a critical role in steering the early church away from adding law-keeping (specifically circumcision) to the gospel message. Having become convinced of Jesus' Messiahship and His gospel message, James would eventually give up his life as a martyr in the year 62 A.D.

Date

An interesting omission in James's letter is the specific mention of Gentiles, Gentile churches, or any issue related to Gentiles joining the Jewish church.[7] Also absent is any mention of the Jerusalem Council (approx. A.D. 49), which dealt with the issue of the necessity of circumcision for salvation. These factors would seem to indicate that the church at that time was still very Jewish in its participation and flavor, not having encountered Gentile concerns. If James wrote this letter before the influx of Gentiles in the church and before the Council in Jerusalem, it would have been written in the mid-40s. This would make James's letter the first book written in the NT.[8]

Background & Setting

Any study of the background of this letter requires an acknowledgment of its Jewish nature. James's letter begins by addressing "the twelve tribes in the dispersion" (1:1). As Doerksen points out, the phrase "twelve tribes" is intended to include the entire Jewish nation.[9] James's mention of their "assembly" (lit. synagogue), along with references to the Royal Law (2:8)[10], indicates that ethnic Jews who have trusted in Jesus as Messiah and Savior are James's intended

---

[6] Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary: James, 1 & 2 Peter* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2014), 7.

[7] John F. MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: James* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1998), 5.

[8] Ibid., 5.

[9] Vernon Doerksen, *Everyman's Bible Commentary: James* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1983), 9.

[10] Ibid., 9.

audience. James's audience was *Christian* Jews.[11] But who are these ethnic, believing Jews living in the dispersion? And what is the dispersion?

When you think of the phrase 'dispersion,' think of the adjective *dispersed*. If something is dispersed, it means it's spread out over a great distance. This is what took place with the Jewish people in 722 and 587 BC. The Assyrians carried the Northern Kingdom away into exile in 722 BC and the Babylonians did the same to the Southern Kingdom in 587. Not every Jew returned home to the land after the Exile. For the ones who did return to Jerusalem, another scattering took place in Acts 8 at the martyring of Stephen. Many were scattered throughout the Roman Empire, earning them the label "the Dispersion."[12]

What's the big deal with being scattered?! Being scattered away from their homeland meant that they did not enjoy the privileges and opportunities that came with being home. They were mistreated by Gentiles and often looked down upon by fellow Jews. According to some sources, they were even considered lower than a Roman slave in some locations.[13] Facing trials that required wisdom and faith was part of daily life for these folks. In a culture that is increasingly hostile to Christianity, we face many of the same challenges today. James was written *to* Jewish believers living in the 1st century, but it is also *for us today*.

Purpose

As mentioned above, these Jewish believers had fallen on hard times. James's purpose in writing this letter was to encourage and exhort these scattered believers to keep on keeping on in the faith. Swindoll writes:

> "When James wrote this letter, Jewish communities had already been established throughout the Roman world as a result of numerous exiles from the Holy Land…. Roman Emperor Claudius persecuted the Jews of Rome and drove them from the city. Jewish businesses were boycotted. Jewish children were mocked and thrown out of schools. Times were harsh and life was grim…. Many of these men and women found themselves in a social and religious limbo…. In this context of suffering, confusion, and defection, it is not surprising that James writes a letter of strong exhortation. Remember, this letter was not a doctrinal treatise, [and] not a defense of the gospel regarding the person and work of Christ…. *Instead, James penned a letter about authentic faith lived out in a real world* [emphasis added]."[14]

[11] Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2007), 849.
[12] Doerksen, 13-14.
[13] The Jeremiah Study Bible, NIV (Franklin, TN: Worthy Publishing, 2016), 1,767.
[14] Swindoll, 13-14.

Theological Themes

Unfortunately, the NT letter of James has been unfairly criticized at times.[15] Due to the very practical concerns it addresses, some have acted as if those concerns are not founded upon solid Christian theological beliefs. Nothing could be further from the truth! A brief study of James's importance to the early church reveals that he was essential in steering away from a works-based salvation (i.e., that circumcision was required in addition to faith).

The ESV Study Bible states that the primary theme of this letter is "living out one's faith, being a doer and not just a hearer of the word."[16] Other key theological themes are present in this letter as well. These would include:[17]

- God's purposes in trials
- Seeking godly wisdom
- Resisting temptation
- God's care for the poor and His hatred of favoritism toward the rich
- Importance of godly speech
- Reality that Christian works (i.e., living out your faith) are essential evidence of true faith
- Need for repentance from sin
- Being prayerful and patient in times of suffering

**One highly significant issue raised in the study of James's letter is the supposed contradiction between James and Paul on the issue of justification. These two NT writers are sometimes pitted against each other on this critical issue, however, as Plummer notes: "Much apparent tension dissolves when one notes that Paul and James are addressing different theological errors. Paul attacks the false doctrine that salvation can be obtained through obeying the law…. James, on the other hand, attacks nominal Christianity, which intellectually affirms orthodox faith but displays no transformed life."[18] Where Paul would say you can't work for true salvation, James would agree, and add that true salvation shows itself by the way we live after coming to Christ.

Literary Genre

The book of James has an interesting literary makeup. It is classified as a general epistle since the audience is not a specific location, but a wide swath of believers throughout the Empire. The word epistle simply means a letter. As you read and interpret James, remember you are studying a letter. The normal, natural way to read a letter is not to dissect it first, but to take it as a whole. The parts make up the whole, to be sure, but do not lose sight of the format in which this book was composed. It is crucial to interpret each genre of Scripture according to its unique "rules."

It is worth noting that this letter takes a unique shape after the standard opening we expect from an epistle. The content of James is organized much like the organization of the

---

[15] MacArthur references Martin Luther's famous, but uncharitable, comments regarding James's letter. Luther did not question its inspiration by the Spirit, but still, he regarded it as a 'rather strawy epistle.' This unhelpful designation has somewhat "stuck" to the letter in the minds of some. But it is imperative that we take this letter on its own merit and allow James to address those purposes for which he wrote. While it is not a theological anthology, we must remember it was not intended to be such.

[16] ESV Study Bible, 2,387.

[17] Plummer, 222..

[18] Ibid., 223.

Proverbs in the OT.[19] James shifts from theme to theme in fairly quick succession. This has led some to question whether James's letter is a lightly edited synagogue sermon.[20] This does not affect the truth of James's letter in the least, however, because a simple reading reveals common themes found in Jesus's teaching (e.g., themes addressed in His Sermon on the Mount). It would do us much good to remember that Jesus's teaching was deeply theological, and yet, always practical. Both Jesus and his half-brother James remind us that it is unhelpful and biblically inaccurate to attempt to divide theology from daily living.

Interpretive Challenges

See above notes on audience, theological themes, and genre.

***Also see the information at the end of this leader guide. It comes from IVP's work entitled "Hard Sayings of the Bible" by Kaiser, Davids, Bruce, and Brauch.*

[19] ESV Study Bible, 2,389.
[20] Plummer, 223.

LEARNING TO STUDY YOUR BIBLE – THREE VITAL STEPS[21]

1. Observe: What Does It Say?

The first step is observation (or perhaps better, comprehension). Whenever we open God's Word, our most fundamental task is simply to see what's there. The good news is that observation isn't complicated. It mainly consists of reading slowly and carefully in order to gather the basic facts of who, what, where, and when. Good questions to bear in mind include:

- Are there any repeated words or ideas?
- Who is speaking or writing?
- To whom are they speaking or writing?
- Who are the main characters?
- Where is this taking place?
- Are there words that show chronology?
- Are there contrasts, comparisons, or conditional statements?
- What is the logical progression in the author's argument?
- Are there words that indicate atmosphere, mood, and emotion? Figures of speech?
- What are the section divisions and linking words?
- What don't I understand here?

Biblical observation doesn't have to be some drawn-out, laborious process. You don't need to consciously ask and answer each question. The more you engage the Bible, the more alert you'll become to such things. (By the way, it's best to work through whole books of the Bible from beginning to end, rather than adopting a "popcorn" approach that ignores context and bounces randomly from one passage to another.)

2. Interpret: What Does It Mean?

The next step is interpretation. You've considered what the passage says, but what does it mean? It may help to ask questions like:

- Does the surrounding context clarify any confusing words or phrases? (It's wise to examine the "nearest" context—other verses in the same chapter or other chapters in the same book—before consulting "farther" passages or outside resources.)
- How would I paraphrase this passage in my own words?
- Why did the biblical author write this particular passage? Why did he feel it necessary to include?
- Is my interpretation consistent with what I noticed in the observation stage, or is it too dependent on a few details?
- Do other passages of Scripture fill out my interpretation? (The saying "Let Scripture interpret Scripture" reminds us to let clearer passages shed light on more complex verses.)
- Where does this passage fall in redemptive history? How does it fit within the Bible's teaching as a whole?

---

[21] *Taken from an article entitled, "How to Study Your Bible in 2020." December 30, 2019, Matt Smethurst. Only edits involve layout adaptations. Original article may be found at https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/how-to-study-bible/.*

Shortly after his resurrection, as described in Luke 24, Jesus encounters two men and explains the most vital secret to Bible study: the entire thing is about him: Jesus said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:25–27). But it wasn't just after his resurrection that Jesus spoke this way. During his earthly ministry, he explained to the local "Bible experts" his central place in the great story:
You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life. . . . If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. (John 5:39–40, 46). It's one thing to know Bible stories; it's another to know the story of the Bible. It's one thing to be aware of the story's many heroes; it's another to know the Hero himself. It's been stated that the Old Testament is "Jesus Christ concealed," and the New Testament is "Jesus Christ revealed." From beginning to end, the storyline of Scripture looks forward to and finds its final resolution in God's redeeming Son (John 1:45; 8:56; 12:16; 2 Cor. 1:20; 1 Peter 1:10–12; Acts 13:27; 13:29; 28:23).

Here is a simple framework, gleaned from a pastor named Tommy Nelson, that has helped me interpret all of Scripture with the Savior in view:

- Old Testament: Anticipation
- Gospels: Manifestation
- Acts: Proclamation
- Epistles: Explanation
- Revelation: Consummation

It's worth noting that once you've interpreted as best you can, it's often useful to consult an outside study aide such as a commentary or Bible dictionary. Though never replacements for Scripture, such tools can be great supplements. (To start I'd recommend the ESV Study Bible, the New Bible Commentary, and the New Dictionary of Biblical Theology.)

3. Apply: How Should I Respond?

After observation and interpretation comes application. This is the ultimate goal of Bible study. In the first two stages you study the text; now the text studies you. To quit prematurely, before applying what you observe and interpret, is like chewing without swallowing.
The Bible itself is clear about the importance of moving through understanding to obedience (Matt. 7:24–27; John 13:17; James 1:22; 2 Tim. 3:16–17). Helpful questions to ponder at this stage include:

- What's something I learned about God—his character, his plan, his priorities, his promises, his desires, his ways?
- What's something I learned about myself? My neighbor? The world?
- What's the "fallen condition" on display in this passage (i.e., what aspect of human sin or brokenness is most evident)? How about the "redemptive solution" (i.e., what aspect of God's grace is most evident)?
- How does the gospel—the stunning news of what God accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to reconcile rebels to himself—affect my understanding of this passage? Conversely, how does this passage illumine my understanding of the gospel?

- How do I need to change my thinking or living based on what I've learned?
- How should I be praying in light of this passage?
- Is there an encouragement or promise here that I need to meditate on?
- What implications does this passage have for the way I engage my unbelieving friends?
- How does this passage apply to my brothers and sisters in Christ? How does it speak to our life together as a church?

Take the Plunge

What does this Scripture passage say? That's *observation*.
What does it mean? That's *interpretation*.
How should I (or we) respond? That's *application*.

A Few Extras:

When studying any passage, three questions are key:

1. What do I see? [Observation]
2. What does it mean? [Interpretation]
3. What do I/we need to do? [Application]

Remember – the focus of these groups is ***Discovery* & ***Discussion*****!!**
You don't have to know everything or have all the answers. The goal is to foster environments and attitudes of discovery and discussion in the group.

Let's all assume the attitude/posture of a LEARNER – ***not* a KNOWER!**

Meeting in Living Rooms for a purpose…

Recommended Resource List:

- ESV Study Bible
- The Message of the NT – Mark Dever
- Wiersbe NT Commentary [free PDF available online]
- MacArthur Bible Commentary
- NIV Application Commentary
- Everyman's Bible Commentary: James – Vernon Doerksen
- Swindoll's Living Insights: James, 1 & 2 Peter (in one vol.)
- The Bible Knowledge Commentary: James – Walvoord & Zuck
- The IVP Bible Background Commentary (2nd ed.) – Craig Keener

Small Group Outline — Spring 2024

Book of James

Jan. 22-25	Cover week 1 — James 1:1 (shorter lesson) ***Use this week to reconnect & fellowship together!*
Jan. 29 - Feb. 1	Cover week 2 — James 1:2-18
Feb. 5-8	Cover week 3 — James 1:19-27
Feb. 12-15	Cover week 4 — James 2:1-13
Feb. 19-22	Cover week 5 — James 2:14-26
Feb. 26-29	Cover week 6 — James 3:1-12
Mar. 4-7	Cover week 7 — James 3:13-18
Mar. 11-14	****ASU Spring Break — No Small Groups**
Mar. 18-21	Cover week 8 — James 4:1-12
Mar. 25-28	Cover week 9 — James 4:13-17
Apr. 1-4	Cover week 10 — James 5:1-6
Apr. 8-11	Cover week 11 — James 5:7-12
Apr. 15-18	Cover week 12 — James 5:13-20

Apr. 22-25	****Extra week — Use for fellowship time OR cover a week missed due to weather**
Apr. 29 - May 1	****No small groups — week of finals**

**LDOC — May 1

**Reading Day — May 2

**Exams — May 3, 6-9

Teaching Outline — Spring 2024
Book of James

January 14	***Soft Launch — Msg TBD*
January 21	*Book Intro.*
January 28	James 1:1 — Greeting & Bio. on James
February 4	James 1:2-18
February 11	James 1:19-27 ***Meet for CC (5-6:30) — Super Bowl party to follow*
February 18	James 2:1-13
February 25	James 2:14-26
March 3	James 3:1-12
March 10	****ASU Spring Break — NO CC!**
March 17	James 3:13-18
March 24	James 4:1-12
March 31	James 4:13-17
April 7	****Spring Retreat Wknd. — NO CC!** ***No msg on James 5:1-6 due to schedule*

April 14	James 5:7-12
April 21	James 5:13-20
May 5	****Year End Celebration** ***Words Gifts*
**LDOC — May 1 **Reading Day — May 2 **Exams — May 3, 6-9	

JAMES

1:2 Are Christians Masochists?

The term *trials* used in this verse means a "test," and it is often translated "temptation" in other contexts. The trials in this case are the tests of faith that come from low-grade persecution from outside the church and from conflict within it. This is hardly a situation in which one would expect to have joy. How then can James argue that we should consider it "pure joy"? Is he some type of masochist? Is it necessary for Christians to deny pain and smile all the time? Our humanity cries out for an honest explanation of such questions, for to deny the reality of pain is a denial of our being human.

James 1:2-4 does not stand alone. It parallels similar sayings in Romans 5:3-5 ("we also rejoice in our sufferings") and 1 Peter 1:6-7, all of which are "chain sayings" that link together virtues, one leading to the next. The situation pictured in all three of these passages is that of persecution. James and 1 Peter picture the persecution as a test of faith, a trial or temptation (the two authors use the identical phrase). Romans simply calls it "suffering" or "affliction" or "tribulation" (the term, like all terms for suffering, indicates persecution or hardship endured because of the faith, not illness). We know something about the type of persecutions that Paul endured; James's community appears to be experiencing low-level economic persecution; Peter's readers have apparently been ostracized from their society and subjected to some violence (although not death). None of these are pleasant situations.

The call to rejoice, however, is not masochistic. Masochism is taking pleasure in pain. The masochist wants to experience pain because it is the pain that gives this person pleasure. In these passages, however, we are not to rejoice in the pain, but in the future reward beyond the pain. James believes we should rejoice because trials give us an opportunity to develop the virtue of perseverance, which will in turn lead to a mature Christian character. We rejoice like an athlete in a practice session. Ath-

letes may run or lift weights to the point of pain, but all the time their eyes are set on the big race or game. They rejoice not in the enjoyment of the stress but in the knowledge that their muscles are growing stronger and therefore they will do better when it counts. James is probably dependent upon Jesus: "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven" (Mt 5:11-12). Here we see why character is important: it will be rewarded in heaven. In other words, faithfulness under pressure today earns eternal reward tomorrow. This is seen in the life of Jesus, who "for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame" (Heb 12:2). This is how Christians are to live. As one writer puts it, James is talking about "eschatological anticipated joy."[1] It is joy not in the present feelings but in the anticipation of praise when one finally stands face to face before Jesus. The joy of that day is tasted in part already in the painful present. Thus Paul and Silas sing in the Philippian jail, not because they enjoyed the beating (although it may have been one reason why they were awake) but because they knew their Lord would more than adequately reward their suffering (Acts 16:25). It is a privilege to suffer for Jesus (Acts 5:41).

This is not to say that we cannot call pain, pain. Paul makes it very clear that he could recognize pain, call it what it is, and experience it with the full depth of human anguish (1 Cor 4:9-13; 2 Cor 4:3-12; 11:23-29). He also left us the example of fleeing from persecution when it was appropriate (Acts 17:10, 13-14). Yet even in such situations he, with James, could look beyond them to "an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (2 Cor 4:17). We may know less of James's life, but from the passion in his letter there is no reason to believe that on this point he would have disagreed with Paul. His is a real humanity and depth of feeling, but at the same time he looks beyond the present experience to a transcendent reward.

James, then, is no masochist, but he points to an important truth. Only those who are heavenly minded will suffer for their faith in the present. Those who do not have this anticipated joy invest themselves in the present and avoid disgrace and suffering for Christ, for it could cost them all they have invested themselves in. Those who do have James's perspective can be reckless in their obedience to Christ, for any price they may pay today will be paid back with interest by their Lord. And it is that smile of pleasure on his face when he greets them that they rejoice in, for they already see it dimly down the halls of time as the Spirit makes it real in their hearts.

---

[1]J. J. Thomas, "Anfechtung und Vorfreude," *Kerygma und Dogma* 14 (1968): 183-206. I have translated the term *eschatologische Vorfreude* as "eschatological anticipated joy."

1:13 God Does Not Tempt Anyone?

When a person is suffering, it is always a temptation to blame God. After all, is God not sovereign? Doesn't everything in some sense come from him? Thus James 1:13 pictures a situation in which a person is suffering (being persecuted or experiencing disadvantage due to a commitment to Christ), and this suffering is testing the commitment to God. The question is, Will this person remain faithful to God or disobey him? (The Greek term that is translated "tempted" also can be translated "tested," so I will use the two terms interchangeably.) Precisely in such a situation the person might want to blame God. "God, you

sent this situation, and it is too hard for me. It is your fault if I give in."

Paul speaks to just such a concern in 1 Corinthians 10:13. Yet the problem for modern readers is not the situation, but James's response. How can he say God does not tempt anyone when Genesis 22:1 says, "Some time later God tested [or tempted] Abraham"? Furthermore, if God cannot be tempted, how could the Scripture speak of Jesus' being tempted, assuming that the writers believed that he was God? Isn't this a clear situation of one scriptural author contradicting another?

These problems are related, for both the issue of whether God tests (tempts) anyone and the issue of whether God can be tested call upon the Old Testament testing (tempting) tradition. This tradition begins with Abraham, who is presented as one who is tested and passes the test, God concluding, "Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son" (Gen 22:12). Later in the Pentateuch, however, Israel is presented as the group that when tested "disobeyed me and tested me ten times" (Num 14:22). This means that their response to the testing of God in the wilderness (Ex 15:25) was not that of trusting obedience, but that of blaming and demanding (this is what happened at Massah, a name that means "testing" or "tempting"; Ex 17:2, 7). This resulted in commands such as that in Deuteronomy 6:16, "Do not test the LORD your God as you did at Massah." (Ps 78, 95 and 106 reflect on this tradition.)

James sees the testing situation occurring in his community in these Old Testament terms. His concern is that the believers should be trusting like Abraham; they are not to be as Israel and fail the test by blaming God. James gives two reasons for not blaming God. We can translate the first reason "God ought not to be tested by sinful people," instead of the traditional translation "God cannot be tempted by evil." The Greek word *apeirastos*, translated "ought not to be tested" (or "cannot be tempted"), is found only once in the New Testament and nowhere else previously in Greek. Later it is found only a very few times in the church fathers. In those later contexts my translation fits as well as or better than the traditional translation. Furthermore, my translation makes better sense in the context in James. It would be hard to see why the fact that God cannot be tempted would make it wrong to claim that he is behind a test, but it is easy to see that "God ought not to be tested" meets the situation, for then the phrase paraphrases Deuteronomy 6:16 and tells them not to blame God as Israel did at Massah, which is the very thing James pictures them doing. This also solves the problem of Jesus' testing (or temptation), for he was in fact tested by an evil being, which this translation allows to be possible, even if it is a sinful act.

But what about "God does not tempt [test] anyone"? To deal with this problem we must consider the development of doctrine within and between the testaments. Old Testament Hebrews, at least in their earlier period, traced all events directly back to God. Whatever happened, God caused it. This level of revelation was quite appropriate, since God's first task with Israel was to convince them that there was only one God for them to worship. Beginning late in the Old Testament, however, and continuing into the intertestamental period, it became clear that other beings often actually caused the test. While God, since he is sovereign, could have prevented a given situation,[1] he did not instigate every event. This development is seen clearly in Scripture by comparing preexilic (or early exilic) 2 Samuel 24:1, which reads,

"[God] incited David against them," with the postexilic 1 Chronicles 21:1, which says, "Satan . . . incited David." The later book shows a more complex picture. It does not deny the previous model, but it admits that the model that traces all events directly to God leaves out details and complexities that later revelation fills in.

The Jews took their clue from such examples of development in Scripture and understood many other Old Testament Scriptures in this same way. For example, in Jubilees 17:15—18:16 the story of Abraham is retold in terms similar to Job. (Job is a later book that, with Chronicles, fits into the period when Judaism knew more about Satan than it did before the exile.) In Jubilees the Prince Mastema (Satan) comes to God and demands that he test Abraham (whom God knows has already proved faithful in many tests). The test, then, does not originate with God, but with Satan.

This appears to be James's position. In his concluding call to remain faithful to God under pressure, James says, "Resist the devil" (Jas 4:7). Satan is the one who is behind the test. This belief is simply stated, not argued. Even in his earlier passage (Jas 1:13) James does not have to explain this to his readers, for they share with him the same theology. So he can simply remind them of the fact in one line, "God does not test [or tempt] anyone." It is not God who wills ill to people and tries to make them fall; it is Satan. It was not God who wished to do evil to Abraham, but the devil. Therefore rather than blame God (who gives only good gifts, Jas 1:17), Christians should look within at their own desires, which make them vulnerable to the Satanic test and lure them to fall (Jas 1:14). Having seen this, they should stand firm, thus resisting the devil, the ultimate mastermind behind all temptation. Not only is this position good for James's day, but it warns against the same danger of blaming God and gives the same strategy for standing in the test that is appropriate for today.

---

[1]The Scripture never asks why God does not prevent certain situations, except in statements such as 2 Peter 3:9, which suggests that his desire for the salvation of as many as possible keeps him from intervening in a drastic way. We human beings, of course, do not know which events God does not prevent because he has some hidden purpose in them and which he does not prevent because to do so would mean to bring the end of the age prematurely. We can speculate on this, but Scripture does not enter into our speculation.

1:17 Does God Change?

See comment on GENESIS 6:6; 1 SAMUEL 15:29; JONAH 4:1-2.

2:5-7 God Chose the Poor?

See comment on JAMES 5:1.

2:24 Justified by What You Do?

Ever since Martin Luther, Christians have struggled with putting James 2:24 together with such statements of Paul's as "we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law" (Rom 3:28). It appears at first glance that James is advocating a justification through works and Paul one through faith. This impression grows when we realize that each cites the example of Abraham to support his argument. Are these two authors opposed to one another? Must we choose between the two for our theology? Was Luther correct that James is an "epistle of straw" that contradicts Paul's essential insight into the gospel?

The answer to all of these questions is no. A surface reading of James and Paul is apt to miss what both authors were saying. Therefore, we must examine each of the critical terms in the verse in James: *faith, works* and *justified.*

The first term James and Paul have in

common is *faith.* In James 2:19, the author gives a clear definition of what he means by "faith alone": "Do you believe that God is one?" This is not only the basic creed of Judaism (Deut 6:4) but also a truth about God that Jews believed Abraham discovered. It is orthodoxy, but in James it is an orthodoxy totally separated from obedience ("You have faith; I have deeds," Jas 2:18), an orthodoxy that demons have as well. Elsewhere James gives a different definition of faith. The faith of James 1:6 and 2:1 is that of personal commitment, which includes trust and obedience; in contrast, the faith that James sees his opponents claiming in James 2:14-26 is orthodoxy without action.

Paul also has a definition of faith, which he gives in Romans 10:9-10. Faith means a commitment to a living Lord Jesus and a confession that "Jesus is Lord." This is similar to the relational trust type of faith that James refers to in chapter 1. In Galatians 5:6, Paul goes on to state that in Christ the issue is not one of Jewish rituals (circumcision), but of "faith working through love" (RSV). This faith-love pairing is not accidental, for it occurs repeatedly in Paul (see 1 Cor 13:13; 1 Thess 1:3; 3:6). Love, of course, is not a feeling or emotion, but loving action, that is, deeds or works. For Paul, then, faith is a commitment to Jesus as Lord that results in a life of love. If the love is lacking (as "the deeds to the flesh" or "unrighteousness" show), then such a person is no heir of God's kingdom (1 Cor 6:9-10).

Since James (in Jas 2:14-26) and Paul are using different definitions of faith, it is not surprising that they use the example of Abraham differently. For Paul (in Rom 4 and Gal 3), the critical issue is that Abraham was declared righteous in Genesis 15:6, which comes chronologically before the institution of circumcision in Genesis 17. Since ritual law is the issue for Paul, as we will see below, the fact that Genesis 15 comes after significant acts of obedience by Abraham (such as leaving Haran to journey to Palestine) is no problem. For James, on the other hand, the critical issue is that the declaration of actual righteousness in Genesis 22:12 shows that the faith referred to in Genesis 15:6 is not mere orthodoxy but a trust leading to actual righteous deeds, so that "[his] faith worked together with his deed and the faith was completed by the deeds" (Jas 2:22). In other words, the two men come at the Abraham narrative from different directions, using different definitions of faith, and as a result argue for complementary rather than contradictory conclusions.

The second term James and Paul share is "works" or "deeds," the Greek word *ergōn.* In the verse cited above (seen against the wider context of Jas 2:14-26), James is clearly arguing for *certain* works. The two deeds he cites are (1) Abraham's offering of Isaac and (2) Rahab's hospitality to the spies. Within the epistle he mentions other acts of charity and the control of language. These fit well with Abraham's act, for in Jewish eyes this offering was the culmination of a lifetime of obedience to God and charity toward others. The fact that Isaac was not sacrificed was seen as a declaration of Abraham's righteousness.[1] Furthermore, Rahab's hospitality, like some of Abraham's actions, was viewed as an act of charity. We are not surprised, then, to discover that charity is the issue that begins the argument leading to James 2:14-17. Thus the works James is arguing for are good deeds (charitable acts, generosity).

Paul is clearly against certain works as a means of becoming righteous, but the works he is against are "the works of the law," a phrase also found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, but never used by James.

The "of the law" is always present, at least in the near context, when Paul speaks negatively of works. What are these deeds? The principal one Paul mentions is circumcision, although he also speaks of the observance of (Jewish) holy days and (Jewish) dietary laws. In other words, while Paul never mentions charity and other good deeds in these negative contexts, he is against those cultic acts of the Mosaic law that set apart a Jew from a Gentile. This fits the context of the Pauline letters, for the issue he is facing is that some Jewish Christians are demanding that the Gentile believers become proselytes to Judaism to be saved. Paul denies there is any such need to become Jewish, although there is a need to become godly.[2]

There is, then, no real conflict between James and Paul on the issue of works. Just as his use of "faith" is different from James's, so is Paul's use of "works" different. Not only does Paul always use a phrase James never uses, but in places such as Galatians 5:19-21 he can list evil deeds (similar to James's list in 3:14-16) and then say, "I warn you [now] as I did [earlier] that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God." Paul will not separate moral righteousness from eternal salvation.

Perhaps the most misunderstood of the three terms used in common by James and Paul is the Greek word group including *dikaiosynē* ("righteousness"), *dikaiōsis* ("justification") and *dikaioō* ("declare righteous," or "justify"). The usual meaning of these words in the Septuagint is actual righteousness or a declaration of such righteousness (for example, Rom 1:17; 2:13). James invariably uses these traditional meanings (he never uses *dikaiōsis*). Paul, on the other hand, often writes of God's making a sinner righteous (justifying a sinner, Rom 3:24) or of a righteousness obtained by Christ's being given to the sinner (Rom 5:17) or of the resulting state (justification, Rom 4:25; 5:18).

The Pauline meaning (of which James may well have been ignorant) has dominated Protestant thinking since the Reformation and has been read into James by many translations (as the KJV, RSV and NIV all do in Jas 2). This creates an artificial conflict between James and Paul. James, on the one hand, is asking how God knew Abraham was righteous when he made the statement in Genesis 22:12 and how the reader can know that the faith in Genesis 15:6 was a trust that actually made Abraham righteous. The answer is—from his deeds. And without such deeds any claim of righteousness or of faith is empty. Paul, on the other hand, is pointing out that both Jews and Gentiles are equally short of God's standard of righteous judgment, and thus the issue is how God will make the unrighteous righteous. The answer is—not through cultic ritual but through commitment to (faith in) Jesus Christ. The two authors use their terms in different ways because they address different issues.

It is clear, then, that James and Paul are moving in two different worlds. In James's world Jewish ritual is not an issue (perhaps because all of those in his church are Jews), but ethics is. His problems are with those who claim to be right with God on the basis of their orthodoxy although they are ignoring obedience issues, especially charity. Abraham and Rahab, in contrast to the demons, demonstrate that saving faith is seen in its deeds. Paul, on the other hand, is concerned about the relationship of Jews and Gentiles in the church. His concern is that commitment to Jesus as Lord is all that is necessary for salvation. A Gentile does not have to become a Jew to enter the kingdom; those ritual deeds that marked the Jew are unnecessary. In the places where Paul does ad-

dress the issue of whether a person can enter the kingdom while living in sin, he emphatically denies this is possible, agreeing with James.

Paul himself realized that he was at times misunderstood. Some misinterpreted his denial that legal ritual was needed for salvation, making it into an argument that ethical issues were irrelevant to salvation (Rom 3:8; 6:1; 1 Cor 6:12). Paul strongly repudiated these people. It is unclear whether James was contending with an orthodoxy-without-deeds rooted in Judaism (such as rabbis would later attack) or a misunderstood Paulinism (such as Paul himself attacked). Both are possible backgrounds. It is clear that James is not attacking any actual belief of Paul's, but that Paul could endorse everything James wrote, although given his differing use of vocabulary, Paul would not have said it the same way.

This verse, then, remains hard, but it is hard because its teaching is uncomfortable. God is concerned with our deeds, and they are related to whether or not we enter the kingdom. It is not hard because there is any conflict between this teaching and Paul's. The two merely *sound* contradictory rather than *are* contradictory. In fact, a lot of the apparent contradiction is due to the misunderstanding of Paul found in Luther and perpetuated by those who fail to put Paul into his proper Jewish background.

If James is dealing with a misunderstood Paulinism, then, it is probable that the sermon in James 2:14-26 comes from a period before he met Paul, for it is likely that once they discussed the gospel together James would have cited Paul's own words against anyone who claimed Paul as an authority for such a twisted doctrine as James is countering.

The James-Paul issue, then, is partially a misunderstanding of Paul (stemming from the fact that Luther was concerned with earning his salvation through penance and pious deeds rather than with Jewish ritual, thus a reading of Luther into Paul) and partially a problem of reading Paul into James. In reality, the writings of James and Paul demonstrate a relative harmony, combined with differing spheres of ministry and thus differing perspectives (which are apparent in Galatians and Acts).

---

[1]For further information on this, see R. B. Ward, "The Works of Abraham: James 2:14-26," *Harvard Theological Review* 61 (1968): 238-90, and Peter H. Davids, *Commentary on James*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1982), pp. 126-32.

[2]See further J. D. G. Dunn, "The New Perspective on Paul," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 65 (1983): 96-122, or the discussion of the relevant passages in J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1—8*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1988).

2:25 Was Rahab Right to Lie?

See comment on JOSHUA 2:4-6.

4:4 Friendship with the World Is Hatred Toward God?

James seems to argue in James 4:4 that one cannot love God and at the same time, for example, have a career. Is this advocating some type of otherworldly Christianity? Does not the Scripture teach that God loves the world? Should not we also?

The language of this verse is very direct. James literally calls his readers "adulteresses" (a fact obscured by the NIV translation). This does not mean that he is addressing only women, but that he wants us to see that he is borrowing language from the Old Testament. The Old Testament pictures Israel as God's bride, who at the same time wanted to enjoy other "lovers," finding security in other gods and imperial powers (see Is 1:21; Jer 3; Hos 1—3). Given the New Testament bride-of-Christ language (2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:22-24; Rev 19;

21), borrowing this language for the New Testament is quite appropriate. The "other lover" in this case is "the world"; that is, the values and goals of their culture.

The Christians whom James is addressing wanted to be successful and gain status in the world's eyes, while at the same time they were followers of Jesus. This parallels what Israel did in trying to serve both Yahweh and Baal. Israel, and especially the kingdom of Judah, never planned to give up the worship of Yahweh. All of his feasts were duly celebrated, his sacrifices made. The priests were employed to ensure this. But at the same time the people served Baal (and other gods), even erecting their altars in the courts of Yahweh's temple. Likewise these Christians were struggling for worldly status even within the church (Jas 4:1-2; compare Jas 2:2-4).

Jesus pictured a similar situation when he said, "No one can serve two masters. . . . You cannot serve both God and Money" (Mt 6:24). The issue is not *how well* one can serve this or that master, but that one *cannot* serve them both. It is impossible. It is impossible first of all because one has only so much emotional energy. If you are deeply invested in the values of your culture, you cannot have enough energy left over to have a similar investment in God and his values. If you are invested in God,[1] you do not at the same time have the energy left to value what the surrounding culture values. We display what we value in our use of time, energy and money. All are in limited supply. All are placed at the disposal of what one is emotionally invested in. If these treasures go to one place, they cannot go to another.

Second, it is impossible to serve two because both are jealous lovers. Throughout the Old Testament, God presents himself as the one who demands exclusive loyalty. He is a husband who will not share his wife with anyone else, even if the sharing only happens when he is off at work! Likewise Baal (or whatever other god) demands more and more. What begins as a both-and arrangement slowly erodes into a Baal-only arrangement as Baal takes so much energy that the worship of Yahweh begins to be neglected. In the New Testament Jesus points to God's exclusive demand when he speaks about taking up one's cross and following him (see Mt 10:38). The person going out to execution on the cross has invested all—wealth, reputation, even life itself—in the cause for which he is dying; there is no future separate from that cause. It is this same total commitment to which Jesus calls all of his followers. For this reason the New Testament does not talk about a tithe—God wants it all (see 2 Cor 8:2-5).

James is doing nothing more than calling his readers to a similar total commitment. In the preceding verses we discover that the readers have been using two means to get what they want. First, they struggle with each other, perhaps including vying for power within the Christian community. Second, they pray. But, adds James, they receive no answers to their prayers. This is because they are trying to use God to gain their own ends. God becomes the "sugar daddy" to fulfill their desires, but it is desire, not God, that they are really serving. Both strategies, that of struggle and that of manipulative prayer, show that they are invested in the world. The one is clearly a direct and open struggle, while the other sounds very pious; the underlying commitments and results are the same. When push comes to shove they are committed to their cultural values, not to God.

Our verse, then, is a warning. They have become God's enemies by their

commitment to the world. Is there any hope? The next verse tells us that God is indeed jealous, but then James goes on to point out that God gives grace to the humble. Yes, there is hope if they will humble themselves and repent. God is ready to give them grace.

Can one have a career and serve God? James's answer is no. The career or vocation of every Christian is to serve God. One might serve God *within* a given career, but the career must not be where one's heart is invested if the person is indeed serving God (and not God's enemy). How can we tell the difference? Watch what happens when there is a conflict of values. (The conflict can come over issues of personal morality, but more often comes over issues of corporate morality and goals or over the issue of commitment to the job, such as whether one will agree to a transfer.) Does the person compromise and do what is expected by the corporate (or academic or professional) culture? Or does the person lose status on the job by refusing to compromise? This decision shows clearly whom they are really serving. Is this, then, an otherworldly lifestyle? James's answer is yes. By this he would not mean that one does not have a very down-to-earth practical effect on this world (especially since caring for the poor is a very important part of his message), but that all of one's life and lifestyle is determined by a commitment to Christ. The only reward that really counts is that which comes from Christ. The values that a person values are Christ's values. For James this is not a special level of Christianity; it is Christianity pure and simple.

This saying in James is hard, but not because it is that difficult to understand. It means just what it says. The problem is that we with our divided hearts find what it means very uncomfortable. Here, however, James is just as uncompromising and just as realistic as his master, Jesus.

See also comment on MATTHEW 6:24; JAMES 5:1; 1 JOHN 2:15.

---

[1]Being invested in God does not necessarily mean being busy in church work. It would mean spending enough time in the presence of God to learn from him what priorities he has for one's life. See Joyce Huggett, *The Joy of Listening to God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986) and Peter Lord, *Hearing God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1988). Church work itself often can be simply more worldly business, a way to gain status or one's personal ends in another sphere.

[2]For further reading, see John White, *Magnificent Obsession* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1976, 1990), especially chap. 2.

5:1 Woe to the Rich?

Picture a person walking into an exclusive restaurant near Bay Street or Wall Street where the corporate elite dine and crying out, "Hey, you rich folk, weep and wail because of your misery!" This is the incongruity that appears in James 5:1, which begins a six-verse condemnation of the rich. Such a condemnation immediately raises the question "Why are these rich people condemned?" Does not God love the wealthy people as well as the poor ones? Are not many wealthy folk just as good Christians as their poorer brothers and sisters?

James already has mentioned the rich, referring to them specifically in James 1:10-11, 2:5-7, and in general terms (without using the word "rich") in James 2:2-3, 4:13. In none of the references does he say anything good about them. Interestingly, in these latter passages the individuals are members of the Christian community; in the passages where he uses the term "rich," the people are not Christians. James apparently finds the terms "rich" and "Christian" mutually exclusive.

Why does James not connect the term "rich" to Christians? He is certainly free in calling Christians "the poor" (Jas 1:9;

2:2-3, 5-6). The reason is probably that James is following the teaching of Jesus, who said, "Blessed are you who are poor," and also, "But woe to you who are rich" (Lk 6:20, 24). In fact, Jesus indicated that wealth was a stumbling block to entering the kingdom of God—it is only God's ability to do the impossible that gets wealthy people in (Mk 10:23-27). It is incorrect to try to soften this by saying, "It is impossible for anyone to enter, poor as well as rich. All enter through a miracle of God," for Jesus does not say this. He notes that he came especially to preach the gospel to the poor (Lk 4:18), and he tells the poor whom he blesses, "Yours is the kingdom of God" (Lk 6:20). He never says anything like this to the rich.

The key to this distinction is found at the end of his major discourse on wealth in Luke 12:34, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Given that human beings have only a limited amount of emotional energy to invest in anything, to the degree that one is earth-invested, one's heart is not set on heaven or the love of God. To have a heart set on heaven will mean placing one's "treasure" or investments there as well, which normally means giving earthly wealth in charity. Thus when we see God's miracle in the saving of a rich man, Zacchaeus announces his new-found freedom from wealth before Jesus announces his salvation (Lk 19:1-10).[1] Likewise, when the Spirit comes in Acts, the Christians begin to share their possessions with the poor. James is very aware of this gospel tradition and bases his teaching on that of his older brother Jesus.

So the people James is referring to as "the rich" are not believers. That, of course, would be enough to condemn them to hell. But there is another reason that he singles out these particular rich people for such strong condemnation, and that is their treatment of the poor.

There is a progression in the argument in James 5:1-6. First, it notes the uselessness of wealth, described in terms of garments and money. Stored goods deteriorate, as Jesus pointed out (Mt 6:19-20). Since James's church knows the words of Jesus, James is implying that these people could have had lasting investments had they shared their goods with the poor and thus obtained wealth in heaven. But of course they do not do this, for they are not followers of Jesus and so do not have his values. (Although the wealthy in James's day would have included the political and religious leaders of the Jewish people, who should have had spiritual values similar to those of Jesus.)

Second, their failure to obey the gospel (the teaching of Jesus) will witness against them in the last judgment. Here we find the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31) condensed into two clauses. The rich man was probably an observant Jew, but he failed to submit to God in that he had plenty and yet did not help the poor beggar lying at his very gate. So these rich have stored up goods, but it is the "last days," or end of the age, and the final judgment is coming. Their failure to use their goods for God's purposes will "eat [their] flesh like fire," the fire of hell.

Third, they have practiced injustice. The other charges were bad enough, but now we discover that these absentee landlords (a typical rich person in first-century Palestine) have withheld the pay of the reapers. Leviticus 19:13 states, "Do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight" (compare Deut 24:14-15). The reason for this law was that the poor laborer would immediately spend his wages for food for himself and his family. No pay meant no food. But even though they were reaping and therefore had a harvest to sell, these wealthy peo-

ple found some reason not to pay their workers, perhaps arguing that they could not afford to sell the crop and pay them until the price was higher. They surely had a "legal" reason, justified by the "rabbinic" interpretations of their day. But God condemned such people in Isaiah 5 (especially Is 5:9-10), and he continues to do so. (Contrast Job in Job 7:1-2; 24:10; 31:13, 38-40.)

Fourth, the rich have been self-indulgent. Feasting is fine if there is enough to go around, but self-indulgence when there are those without is a horrible crime before God. Again we think of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, but we should also note that in the laws for the feasts of the Lord (Deut 16) no one was to appear empty-handed; the typical poor (Levite, widow, orphan, alien) were to feast with those who had means. In his condemnation of indulgence, James sounds like Amos.

Indulgence, of course, was viewed more seriously in James's world than in ours of the recent past. The first-century Mediterranean cultures believed that there was only a limited amount of goods in the world, so if someone collected more, someone else would have less or go without altogether.[2] The Western world has behaved as if goods or wealth were limitless and all could be rich if they worked hard enough or were smart enough. Only recently has Western society begun to face limitations and to see that on a global scale, especially when the environment and future generations are taken into account, the first-century view is probably more realistic than ours.

Fifth, these people have oppressed the righteous ("innocent men" in the NIV). In the phrase "condemned and murdered," James probably does not mean that they carried out an illegal activity, but rather that they used the courts to kill. Probably even this killing was not done directly, but through taking away the means of support of the poor through fines or giving judgments in favor of the rich. A peasant who loses his farm or is thrown out of work will soon starve if no other force intervenes. It is all the same to God whether the death is direct or indirect, whether the proceeding is legal or illegal in human terms. In his book it is all murder. That these people were poor Christians (the most likely ones being referred to) makes his judgment that much more certain.

Therefore, James is hardly arbitrary in his condemnation of the rich. Not only are they not Christian, but he has a number of charges against them. Furthermore, prophetic warnings like this one call people to repentance (although the repentance of wealthy people is less likely than that of the poor, according to Scripture), so these people, like those of Nineveh whom Jonah warned, are not outside of God's love. Yet, before we shake our heads sadly about the rich, we must remember that any one of the five charges is serious enough to bring God's condemnation. It is not enough to avoid judicial murder and legal oppression if we are living in self-indulgence and storing up what might have been shared. The Christian response to such a condemnation should not be to continue to point the finger, but to "stand firm" in obedience to Christ (Jas 5:8) and pray to be so filled with the Spirit that we will joyfully join with those in Acts who laid up treasures in heaven by sharing with their poorer brothers and sisters. This will provide a model of the virtue that God desires in a world that still practices (and even extols) the vices he condemns.

See also comment on MATTHEW 6:24; MARK 10:21; 10:25; JAMES 4:4.

[1]This matches John the Baptist's call to repentance

in Luke 3:7-14, which also has an economic focus and also demands repentance before acceptance by God, in his case symbolized by baptism.

[8]See B. Malina, *The New Testament World* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1984). Not all of his arguments are equally convincing, but his demonstration of the concept of "limited goods" is well founded.

5:12 Do Not Swear?

See comment on MATTHEW 5:34.

5:14-16 Prayer Makes the Sick Well?

"Faith healing" has a bad reputation in much of the church. Many of us have known people who have been mishandled by others who believed in healing. I personally can remember a widow who was told that the only reason her husband had died was that he had failed to have enough faith or he had sinned. Others who have not been abused to that extent have been confidently promised healing but have not in fact been healed. With this background, James 5:14-16 concerns us, for it appears to many to give support to these very "faith healers" who have abused or misled us or our friends.

James has given us the picture of a person sick in bed. The proper response to this situation, he instructs us, is to call for the elders of the church; they will pray over the person, anointing him or her with oil in the name of the Lord. But how can James say so matter-of-factly that "the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well"? Did he not have failures in prayer? Does he really mean that elders will have no such failures? And why does he bring in the issue of sin? Did not Jesus deny that sin had anything to do with sickness (Jn 9:1-3)? Isn't James giving people a basis to load guilt for supposed sin on top of the illness that is already afflicting the person? This passage looks more dangerous than it does pastoral.

Prayer for healing is mentioned frequently in the New Testament. Jesus, of course, healed many (although we never hear him using prayer as a means), and he sent his disciples to do the same. It is they, not Jesus, who anoint with oil (Mk 6:13). Acts continues the acts of Jesus (now being done through the Holy Spirit) and notes numerous healings, beginning just after Pentecost (Acts 3) and continuing to the end of the book (Acts 28:7-10). Paul's mission and preaching were characterized by miracles (Rom 15:18-19; Paul's miracles appear to have been mainly healing miracles and demon expulsions), and his converts experienced the same (Gal 3:5). Furthermore, he mentions "gifts of healing" among the gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:9). It is not surprising, then, to find James writing about healing prayer in the close of his letter where a pagan writer would have put in a health wish. (A normal Greek letter of this type characteristically ended with a summary, an oath, a health wish and a purpose statement; Christian versions of all of these occur in James 5.) He is not introducing something unfamiliar to his readers (one did not do that in the closing), but underlining a practice they knew about and shared in common with others in the early church.

While anointing with oil is mentioned in the context of this passage (Jas 5:14), probably as a type of acted prayer,[1] it is clear that the operant force in healing is God's activity in response to prayer: "the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well." But this prayer is to be a "prayer offered in faith." Of course, we would expect the elders to be able to pray in faith, for they were supposed to be the most mature spiritual leaders of the church and should have the most faith. Notice that it is the elders' faith, not the person's faith, that is mentioned; there is absolutely no basis in this verse for blaming continuing sickness on a

person's own lack of faith. If anyone is to be blamed, it is the elders, the people who prayed. Faith itself is a commitment or trust in God, like the asking in faith of James 1:6.[2] It is a personal relationship, not simply an intellectual conviction. It is also a gift of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:9).

So we are not talking about prayer based on an intellectual conviction that God heals; we are talking about praying out of a relationship with God in which the conviction has grown that God will heal, not in the sense that this is the general will of God (which it always is),[3] but in the sense that it is the specific desire of God now. George Müller, famous for his prayers for funds for his orphanages but also known in his day for his prayers for the sick, noted that while he always had faith (in the sense discussed here) for funds, only until 1836 did he have faith for healing the sick.[4] He still continued to pray for the sick and people were often healed, but apparently he no longer did so with the certainty and success that he continued to experience in praying for funds. It was no longer the prayer of faith in that sense. James, like Jesus (Mk 11:22-24), promises that a prayer of faith will be answered. His statement is a straightforward expectation, which must have been the experience of his community.

This prayer does not appear to be of the five-minute variety, for not only is it likely that such prayer would take time, especially time for listening to God, but there appears to have been some discussion of the person's sins. James is clear that sin is not always the cause of illness. He says, "*If* he has sinned." Like Jesus in John 9:1-2, he apparently knows of situations, perhaps many situations, in which sin was not involved. But like Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:30, he knows of other situations in which it was involved. If James 5:16 is any guide to the practice of his community, an opportunity was given under the wise guidance of the elders for self-examination and confession, with prayer for forgiveness (if needed) being included in the prayer for healing.

Most modern people who pray regularly for the sick can give many illustrations of times when resentment or anger or bitterness or other sins were at the root of an illness. It is important to James to promise that the sin will be forgiven, not just the sickness healed, for without knowing that the sin (which could not be seen directly) was also removed, the person might fear that it would reappear in yet a worse illness. In fact, the experience of forgiveness itself has been known to lead to healing without any further prayer about the disease. Conversely there are examples of healing that was short-lived because the person returned to the root sin.

Finally, James notes, "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." Nowhere in his discussion has James mentioned a gift of healing. Perhaps he expects such gifts of the Spirit to show up when needed in people filled with the Spirit. The focus of his interest is different from Paul's. But up to this point he has been discussing the activity of the elders called to the bedside of a person who is ill, probably too ill to go to church.

Now he broadens the scope of his teaching. Before a person becomes so ill that the elders must be called, Christians should confess their sins and pray for one another. Confession of sin keeps the slate clear and prevents sin from being able to cause illness. Confession to another Christian (presumably one who has some spiritual wisdom and does not gossip) makes the repentance and confession concrete. It also makes it much harder to rationalize the sin. And it makes the prayer for forgiveness just as

concrete. James does not mention these reasons; he just states the command.

Likewise, prayer for each other before the illness becomes serious is in order. Why wait until the elders must be called? Why should the elders do all of the pastoral ministry? And how else will Christians gain the experience in prayer and the faith that will make them good elders? In case the believer says, "I'm not an elder and so God would hardly listen to me," James adds, "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective" (Jas 5:16). All that is needed is to be in harmony with God (righteous), and any Christian can pray with the effects of Elijah.

James is not giving a full treatise on prayer for the sick. There was no need to do so in the early church, for such prayer was their practice. It could be observed everywhere; they had not yet learned not to do it. James is just giving a reminder, encouraging them when the Greek letter form gave him opportunity. In doing so he presents a challenge to the modern church to learn what it is to pray the prayer of faith and so to pray effectively in such a way that people are healed, not abused.[5]

---

[1]The oil is certainly not a medicine, for (1) ancient peoples knew of more types of medicine than oil and would not prescribe a single medication for all ailments, and (2) there was a perfectly good term for "medicine" in Greek, so there was no need to use "oil" to substitute for a more general term. It is also not sacramental if this term implies virtue in the oil itself, for it is the prayer, not the oil, which heals, although the oil may be part of the praying.

[2]The point in James 1:6 is that one is to ask in childlike trust in God, confident of his character as the God who gives generously. The doubter or "double-minded" person is the person who prays but at the same time has their real confidence in their own skills or ability to manipulate others. They pray more to "make sure" or to "get God's blessing on our plans" or because it is the pious thing to do than because they really trust God. In James 4:1-5 James points out that these people are really friends of the world and even such prayers are motivated, not by a call of God, but by an attempt to manipulate God to fulfill their own desires.

[3]See Peter H. Davids, "Suffering and Sickness in the New Testament," in C. Peter Wagner and F. Douglas Pennoyer, eds., *Wrestling with Dark Angels* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1990), pp. 215-37.

[4]The reason for this appears to have been a conflict within the Christian Brethren movement, of which he was one of the leaders, over the place of spiritual gifts. Until the late 1830s the Brethren actively sought and expected spiritual gifts. However, around 1836, after J. N. Darby (another leader) reacted negatively to Edward Irving (a pastor who was what we might call a "proto-charismatic"), they abandoned this expectation. Darby then developed the concept of the cessation of spiritual gifts, which has characterized later dispensationalism.

[5]Perhaps the best contemporary book on prayer for healing is Ken Blue, *Authority to Heal* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1987).

5:20 Saved from Death?

Instead of ending his epistle with a greeting or blessing, James ends with a strange statement. Who is the "sinner" to whom James is referring? And is it the sinner who will be saved from death, or the one saving him or her? And from what type of death will the person be saved? Are we still in danger of eternal death if we sin, or is James saying that sin can lead to physical death?

The verse is in fact very significant. James is written in a typical Greek letter form. It was customary to end such a letter with a summary (Jas 5:7-11), an oath (Jas 5:12), a health wish (Jas 5:13-18) and a purpose statement (Jas 5:19-20). This verse, then, should be part of the statement of the purpose of the whole letter. That in itself is reason enough to assign it great importance.

The condition this verse speaks to is described in James 5:19. A Christian ("one of you") has erred. James gives us plenty of illustrations of this in the letter. The errors he addresses are those of partiality and greed, of anger and jealousy. All of them are found within the church. Such error calls for another Christian ("someone") to point it out so

that the person can repent and be restored ("bring him back"). That, of course, is what the entire letter is about, bringing the Christians he addresses back to proper Christian behavior. This is indeed the purpose statement of James. Therefore the sinner in this verse is a Christian who has fallen into sin, such as greed or criticism of others.

This Christian brother or sister has erred or gone the wrong way—the text is not talking about an individual sin, however "serious" we may consider it, from which the believer quickly repents. As Jesus points out in Matthew 7:13-14 (which may be the word of Jesus that James is applying here), there are two ways. The way that leads to life is narrow and difficult, while the one leading to death is broad and easy. Unfortunately there are many ways to get from the narrow to the broad way. This Christian (the sinner) has taken one of them and is observed by another, whom we shall call the rescuer. The question is, Who is saved from death—the sinner or the rescuer? Ezekiel 3:18-21 is a discourse on the responsibility of the rescuer. If someone sees a person fall into sin and sits by and does nothing, the sinner will indeed receive the results of the sin, but the potential rescuer will be held guilty of the sinner's blood. In the Old Testament such guilt usually cost the person his life. On the other hand, the rescuer who tries to warn the sinner is free of any guilt, whatever decision the sinner makes. This is certainly the message of Ezekiel (Ezek 33:9; compare 1 Tim 4:16), but is it the message of James?

It seems to me that James's message is that the sinner is the one rescued from death by the rescuer's efforts. There are four reasons for this. First, the fact that sins are covered (an adaptation of Prov 10:12: "Love covers all wrongs") seems to refer to the sinner's sins, not the potential sin of the rescuer. Only the sinner has erred in the context. Second, the word order in the Greek text makes it more likely that it is the sinner who is delivered from death. Third, the very picture of turning a person from his wandering way (a rather woodenly literal translation that brings out James's imagery) suggests that it is the error that is putting the individual in danger of death. The rescuer is presumably safe (although potentially in error, if he or she fails to help the erring Christian).

What, then, is the death that the person is saved from? Certainly sin can lead to physical death in the New Testament, as shown by the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11), as well as by Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 11:30 (compare 1 Cor 5:5). Moreover, in James 5:15-16 we discover that sin may be involved in the illnesses of Christians. Could this be what James is referring to? By turning a sinner from their error a person is saved from physical death, their sins being forgiven?

Attractive as this solution is, it is not the most likely interpretation of the passage. The fact that each of the units of James 5:7-20 is separate and dictated by the letter form means that we should look to the body of the letter (and the call to repentance in Jas 4:1-10) rather than to the "health wish" (Jas 5:13-18) for the meaning of "death" in this verse. Both testaments view death as the end result of sin, usually referring to death in terms of eternal death or condemnation at the last judgment (Deut 30:19; Job 8:13; Ps 1:6; 2:12; Jer 23:12; Jude 23; Rev 20:14). James has already mentioned this in James 1:15: desire gives birth to sin, which results in death. That death is contrasted with the life that God gives (Jas 1:18). Since death and life are parallel ideas, it is likely that they are not physical but eternal (or eschatological, to use the more technical term). This parallel, plus the seriousness of the tone

ALLIANCE BIBLE FELLOWSHIP

COLLEGE CONNECTION

1035 NC Highway 105 Bypass
Boone, NC 28607

828-264-8312

abfboone.org/college