

PONDERING SCRIPTURE SERIES

FAITH THAT WORKS!

THE BOOK OF JAMES

THE SOUL RENOVATION PROJECT

RESOURCES FOR PRACTICING THE STYLE OF JESUS

BACKGROUND OF JAMES

The author of the book before us is not James the brother of John, but James, the son of Joseph and Mary; James, the half brother of Jesus. Growing up in the same household with Him, no doubt Jesus' brothers had a hard time getting a handle on Him. This much we know from the Gospel account: Jesus' brothers didn't believe on Him until after His Resurrection—an event that was, even for them, irrefutable and undeniable. In fact, James was so convinced that his Brother was the Son of God that he went on to become a leader in the early church—as evidenced by the account in Acts 15, wherein we see him leading the council in Jerusalem.

As seen in their writings, the Jerusalem believers—James, Peter, and, to a lesser degree, John—tended to behave a bit more strictly than did Paul, Barnabas, and the Antioch believers who were primarily students and scholars of grace. Both groups were—and still are—very definitely needed in the body. It's sort of like a trampoline—pressure from both sides is needed if the trampoline is to stay taut. So, too, with discipline and grace—both are essential.

As we read, we'll see James make reference to the Old Testament forty-five times in this relatively short book, for not only was he related to the Living Word, but he was a man greatly given to the written Word. There is no question as you study the Word of God that for every New Testament Principle you will find an Old Testament Picture!

Allow this short book set your "Faith into Motion" as ponder! In other words, may your Faith be increased and the Works you are known by become wonderful, natural connection of "Faith that really works!"

THE BOOK OF JAMES

CHAPTER 1

James 1:1 (a)

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ...

James certainly doesn't begin his epistle the way I would have. If I were James, I'm afraid I would have identified myself not as James, a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, but as James the brother of the Lord Jesus Christ! James, however, was a man who, although he was very straightforward, as we shall see, was also known as a man of tremendous humility. He doesn't pull rank; he doesn't drop names; he simply considers himself a servant.

James 1:1 (b)

...to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting.

"The twelve tribes" is a reference to the Jewish people scattered throughout the world, who had come to a knowledge of the true Messiah and had become believers in Jesus.

James 1:2

My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations.

Newer translations render this verse "Count it all joy when ye fall into various trials." Why? Because the Greek word for both "trial" and "temptation" is the same. You see, what God will send or allow as a trial to strengthen our faith, Satan will seek to exploit to get us to

sin. Conversely, what Satan throws our way as a temptation, God allows to be a trial. Satan wants to use the event to tear us down and wipe us out; God wants to use the same event to show us how faithful He is and how real He can be.

Think of it this way: If Jerry, a master woodworker, invited me to sit in a chair he had made, I wouldn't do so wondering if it would hold me up, but rather I'd marvel at how well it was crafted. If, on the other hand, Applegate Christian Fellowship's youth director, Tad, invited me to sit in a chair, I would be leery, knowing it would probably either be pulled out from under me, or collapse underneath me. So, too, the chair that Satan seeks to pull out from under us is the very one God uses to show just how strong He can be.

In the Book of Job, we see Satan trying to wipe Job out by afflicting him physically, causing him to lose his family, and ruining him financially. But God was proving something else. God was showing how faithful He would be. As a result, all of history would marvel in studying how, in the midst of what Satan meant for evil, God used it for good as He sustained Job all the way through and rewarded him ultimately.

When a trial comes your way, Satan will be there the same day to try to get you to do what Mrs. Job suggested her husband do—to curse God and die (Job 2:9). But God will be there as well, waiting to show you His strength in seeing you through.

James 1:3, 4

Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.

Like the Jewish believers who were scattered throughout the Roman Empire and beyond, we're to count it joy when we go through trials and face temptations. Why? Because seeing God's faithfulness manifested in the situation, we'll be made entire and complete; we'll become mature. Maturity only comes through testing. Faith is made pure only when fiery trials burn away the dross.

James 1:5–8

If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord. A double minded man is unstable in all his ways.

If you lack wisdom, ask God in faith, and He will give it to you.

For topical study of James 1:5–7 entitled “How to Know What to Do,” turn to page 1520.

James 1:9–11

Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted: But the rich, in that he is made low: because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away. For the sun is no sooner risen with a burning heat, but it withereth the grass, and the flower thereof falleth, and the grace of the fashion of it perisheth: so also shall the rich man fade away in his ways.

The Jewish Christians to whom James is writing would be well aware of an enemy that posed a threat to the people of God throughout their history. Led by giants like Goliath, the Philistines hassled the Jews continually. In our day, we don’t fear Philistines, but it seems that finances bring us into as many trials and testing points. I don’t know of a man or a woman who either at some point or regularly doesn’t deal with a financial trial, wondering how to make ends meet. Whether individually, or as a church family corporately, finances have proven to be the Philistine that stomps and threatens us continually.

Knowing this, James reminds us that regardless of our financial situation on earth, we’re exalted, elevated above the world system because we’re part of a kingdom whose streets are paved with gold. Thus, whether we’re worried about poverty or weighed down with riches, we can be absolutely free if we keep a heavenly perspective.

James 1:12

Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him.

Trials result not only in spiritual maturity but also in crowns eternally. Granted, you may not think crowns are a big deal now—but I guarantee you will in heaven, for your crown will determine whether you'll rule over ten cities, five cities, or no cities in heaven (Luke 19:11–27).

When you face trials and temptations, if you stay close to the Lord, you will hear Him say, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” (see Matthew 25:21) and you will receive the crown of life specifically reserved for those who don’t walk away from Him in trials or temptations.

James 1:13

Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man.

Regarding the entire arena of trials and temptations, understand this: God will allow a trial; Satan will come with a temptation. The trial may be financial; the temptation may be cocaine to escape the pressure. It’s not God who brings the cocaine your way. It’s not God who tempts you with pornography. No, God simply allows the trial to come. It’s Satan who brings the temptation.

Never, ever be mistaken on this point. The trial of our faith is to prove the faithfulness of God. It is never a temptation or an enticement to sin. Therefore, if you’re half-drunk in a bar, the guy offering you free drugs is not God’s way of saying, “I’m going to prove how faithful I am by sending this guy your way.” No! That’s a temptation you brought on yourself by placing yourself in that situation in the first place.

James 1:14, 15

But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.

Sin always brings forth death. Every time. Sin will kill relationships. It will destroy happiness. It will ruin health. When you want to tell kids how serious sin is and what sin

does, the best thing you can do is take them to the Cross of Calvary and say, "Look at this wonderful, perfect, loving Person and see Him on the Cross in agony and pain and blood. It was when Jesus became sin for us that He died, for sin always brings death."

James 1:16

Do not err, my beloved brethren.

"Don't make a mistake about this," James says. Sin always results in death and tragedy. Paul would put it this way: Be not deceived. God is not mocked. Whatever a man sows, that shall he also reap (see Galatians 6:7).

James 1:17 (a)

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights...

The good gifts, the perfect things, and the cool stuff that come your way are solely because of God's grace and kindness and benevolence. You might be a gifted musician, an intelligent person, a hard worker. Those are gifts from God, by grace, that have nothing to do with your earning them. Therefore, there's no room for us to take credit for anything we are able to perform or achieve. Everything that is wonderful in your life is because of God's grace to you.

James 1:17 (b), 18

...with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

Not only is God good in the gifts He gives, but in who He is. In Him there is no variableness or shadow of turning. That is, He's not moody. He doesn't have bad days. He's not generous with me one day, but grouchy the next—as I can so often be.

We're variable. We go up and down. God doesn't. He can be nothing but good. He doesn't react to me according to how I'm doing with Him. He is faithful when I am faithless (2

Timothy 2:13). He is good when I am grumpy. He doesn't change. He's locked into His nature.

That's why I love the Lord so much. He's solid as a Rock. And I can just enjoy Him without worrying about Him being ticked with me or tired of me. He gives nothing but good gifts, for He is a good God.

James 1:19

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.

In talking to the believers dispersed throughout the Roman Empire, undergoing unbelievable persecution, James says, "Don't forget that God is good. And what's happening in you is going to work for good ultimately. Therefore, don't be cynical; don't be quick to complain about your situation. Instead, stop speaking and start listening—and you'll hear God's voice in your trial."

James 1:20

For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.

I hope you have this verse underlined—at least mentally—for being ticked-off and hot under the collar doesn't accomplish anything that proves to be right. Ever.

James 1:21 (a)

Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness...

Referring to the Word of God, "Let every man be swift to hear," James instructed us in verse nineteen.

"But I can't hear God's Word to me," we say.

Perhaps you can't hear the Word of God for you because your ears are clogged up with "filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness"—plain old sin. If I'm filling my ears with the music and the scenes, gossip, and junk of the world, I can't hear properly. I need to get rid of that stuff before I can really be tuned in to God's frequency.

James 1:21(b)

...and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.

Perhaps I can't hear the Word of the Lord because my mind is made up. James tells us we are to receive the Word with meekness, the implication being, "Lord, I'm in this trial or temptation or difficulty, and I need direction from You. I need Your Word to direct me, or I'm not going to do well. Therefore, I come to You not with my own agenda or plan, but meekly. Whatever You say, that's what I'll do."

Many people don't hear from the Lord when they read the Word of God because they lack a spirit of meekness before Him.

James 1:22–25

But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.

Finally, perhaps we can't hear from the Lord because we are mixed up. You see, so many times our tendency is to think that just because we're reading the Word, we're obeying it—at least that's the way it is with me. A lot of times I'll hear a sermon or read a book and I'll say, "Right on. I agree with that." But I deceive myself if, having seen what needs to be taken care of in the mirror of the Word, I then don't do it. One of the great dangers for us who love the Word is to falsely assume that simply agreeing that we should pray means we're praying; or knowing we should worship makes us worshipers.

James clearly warns us not to think that seeing our reflection properly means we're doers of the Word automatically. If the Lord shows you in the Word that you need to praise Him, don't say, "Good point"—but start praising Him right then! If the Lord shows you in the Word that you need to get right with a brother, don't say, "Someday"—do it right then. Be a doer of the Word.

With ears clogged up, mind made up, or all mixed up, we won't hear from the Lord. But reading the Word with meekness and then obeying it is the best hearing aid there is.

James 1:26

If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain.

There's a teaching currently making the rounds that says, "Be honest with God. Tell Him what you really feel. Tell Him you're ticked off." I shudder at such teaching. Oh, it might be popular psychologically, but it's not right biblically. A truly religious man, a deep man, does not pop off and throw temper tantrums at God. God is God, and we're not. God is good, and we're not. If there are problems in our lives, He's not wrong. We are.

James 1:27

Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

James cuts to the bottom line here when he says that rather than being a matter of compromise and verbosity, true religion is a matter of purity and humility.

HOW CAN YOU KNOW WHAT TO DO?

A TOPICAL STUDY OF JAMES 1:5-7

His father, who had been deeply loved and mightily used would be sorely missed. One of the greatest men in all of history, his father was a man who, in addition to being able to leap over walls physically, was so gifted musically that he not only composed songs, but he invented the instruments to play them. So courageous of heart was he that when he was but a teenager, he conquered a giant in battle, making him so popular that women sang songs about him in the streets. This one's father, of course, was David.

And now that David had passed from the scene, Solomon would step up and try to fill his father's shoes—a seemingly impossible task. After learning of his father's death, Scripture tells us that Solomon headed for Gibeon, for in Gibeon was a tabernacle, a place to meet God. That night, the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream, saying, "Whatever you ask of Me, I'll do for you" (see 2 Chronicles 1:7).

"Lord," said Solomon, "I ask of You wisdom. I need to know how to go out and come in amongst these, Your people."

By God's grace, this young man, who had tremendous responsibility suddenly placed upon him and very difficult obligations looming before him, was given the wisdom to ask for wisdom.

So pleased was God with Solomon's request that He said, "I will not only grant you wisdom greater than any other man—but I will give to you more wealth and fame than any other person has ever enjoyed, victory over your enemies, and length of days" (see 2 Chronicles 1:11, 12). In other words, by asking for wisdom, Solomon got everything else thrown in.

Personified as a woman, wisdom says this:

I love them that love me; and those that seek me early shall find me. Riches and honour are with me; yea, durable riches and righteousness. My fruit is better than gold, yea, than fine gold; and my revenue than choice silver. I lead in the way of righteousness, in the midst of the paths of judgment: That I may cause those that love me to inherit substance; and I will fill their treasures. Proverbs 8:17–21

Wisdom cries out to simple men—dumb, unsophisticated, naive, common people like you and me, saying, “If you walk with me, I will cause you to have riches and success in all that you do” (see Proverbs 8:5).

How do we get wisdom? The text before us says if any man lacks wisdom, let him ask of God who gives to all men generously. What does it mean to ask of Him?

In Solomon's day, in Old Testament times, if someone needed wisdom, for example concerning who to marry, where to move, what job to take, he would go to Jerusalem where he would find the high priest. As part of his vesture, the high priest wore a pouchlike breastplate upon which were twelve gems, each representing one of the tribes of Israel. It seems that these gems were instrumental in the dispensing of wisdom. You see, according to Exodus 28:30, if one had need of wisdom or direction personally, or if the people had need corporately, the high priest would consult the Urim and the Thummim. Although we can't say dogmatically what the Urim and the Thummim were, we do know what the words mean: “urim” means “light”; “thummim” means “perfection”—perfect light to give direction.

HOW DID THEY WORK?

It would seem as though the stones on the breastplate of the high priest that were linked to the Urim and the Thummim would light up in such a way that, using the letter of the tribe each represented, an answer would be spelled out. The problem was that, with only the high priest having the Urim and the Thummim, anyone having a question would have to travel all the way to Jerusalem and make an appointment with him to get an answer. Getting wisdom was not an easy thing to do!

There's an infinitely better way for you and me to get light and perfection, for Jesus said, "I am the Light of the world" (John 8:12); and Paul said in Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Colossians 2:3). Thus, Jesus fulfills the Urim and Thummim perfectly. We go to the One who is Light personified, who is Wisdom incarnate, and say, "Lord, what should I do in this situation?"

How does He answer? I suggest three ways....

THROUGH HIS PEOPLE

It was God's people—the twelve tribes of Israel—who symbolically flashed the message on the breastplate of the high priest. So, too, Scripture says God's people are jewels in His crown (Zechariah 9:16). You may not feel like a gem; you may not think the person sitting next to you is of very much value—but on the heart of our High Priest, Jesus Christ, we are just that.

Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety. Proverbs 11:14

Where there is no counsel, people fall—or literally, stumble—in the dark. But as I talk with my brothers, as I share with God's people, the light shines through them in the counsel they give to me.

THROUGH HIS WORD

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path. The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple. Psalm 119:105, 130

I can't tell you how many times when, wondering what I should do or which way I should go, I'll hear someone share from the Word on the radio, and it speaks directly to my situation. Or I'll open the Scriptures, a commentary, or a devotional book and find the Word of God giving perfect light to me.

UPON OUR HEARTS

***But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.* Jeremiah 31:33**

Paul picks up this same idea when he says, “Let the peace of Christ rule in your heart” (Colossians 3:15). The word translated “rule” is an interesting one. A term linked to sports, it was used with regard to officiating or umpiring. In other words, the peace of Christ will call “Safe!” or “Out!” in your heart, giving you light and direction.

I find that these three avenues work together very harmoniously: Through God’s people there is safety. In God’s Word there is light. Upon my heart, He’ll write His will. So I can know whether I should make that move or take that job by simply asking the Lord, knowing He’ll make His will known to me through His people, in the Word, or upon my heart if I ask in faith.

What does it mean to ask in faith?

The integrity of the upright shall guide them... Proverbs 11:3

The Hebrew word translated “integrity” is tummah—from the same word as thummim. In other words, direction and integrity are linked together. What does the word “integrity” mean? It means “integrated” or “single.” Thus, the single-minded man of integrity says, “Father, I’m not asking for wisdom out of curiosity. I’m committed to doing what You tell me.”

Anyone who’s not sure if he’s really going to follow through is double-minded and should not expect to receive direction from the Lord. But to the man who asks in integrity, the man who is single in purpose and heart, God will give wisdom generously.

“But what if I misinterpret His will on my heart, through His people, or in the Word?” you ask.

I believe the answer lies in Genesis 20—where we see the first mention of integrity in the Bible.

Eager to become acquainted with the newest acquisition to his harem, Abimelech looked forward to meeting Sarah—until God appeared to him in a dream, saying, “The woman you’ve taken is another man’s wife.”

“In the integrity of my heart I have done this,” Abimelech answered.

“Yea, I know thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart, for I also withheld thee from sinning against Me. Therefore I allowed thee not to touch her,” the Lord replied.

What’s being said here is wonderful, for God is saying, “Abimelech, you made a mistake. But your heart was right, so I protected you in the decision you made.”

This means that when I ask God to give me wisdom, He gives me direction through His people, in His Word, and upon my heart. But even if I don’t hear correctly and make a wrong decision, if my heart is right, the Lord will protect me and correct me just as He did Abimelech.

So many people never move out because of the paralysis of analysis. That is, they’re always analyzing a situation to determine what they should do. The Genesis 20 account frees us from this, for if our hearts are right, we can move ahead, knowing that He will protect us even if we’re moving in the wrong direction.

As you pray today, I encourage you to do what you know, and you’ll know what to do. You know that you should be in fellowship with others, studying the Word with your brothers and sisters. I don’t know what I’m to do tomorrow. I don’t know what’s ahead for me next month or next year. I simply know what I’m supposed to do today. So I do what I know today, and when tomorrow comes, I’ll know what to do then. You will too.

If you lack wisdom, ask of God. And if you do that in faith, you’ll be doing what you know. Then through His people, through His Word, and through His will upon your heart, you’ll know what to do as you walk in the Light of the Perfect One, Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER 2

James 2:1–4

My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons. For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; and ye have respect to him that weareth the fine clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts?

If you knew that in ten minutes you would have a half-hour meeting with Donald Trump, would you comb your hair, brush your teeth, think about what you would say? What if you knew that in ten minutes you would meet with a homeless man? Would you expend the same kind of energy?

This is what James is getting at. We're all vulnerable; we're all guilty of treating people differently, depending on how we view them outwardly. But almost without exception, the irony is that the people we try to impress the most are those who care about us the least all while the people who really would be open to receiving from us are those for whom we think we don't have time.

On the high-school campus, so often the goal is to see the quarterback or the head cheerleader saved. The real key, however, is to go for the kid who sits in the back of the cafeteria all alone, for he's the one who is most often the one ready to listen. The same holds true where you work. We tend to get all excited about the people we highly esteem financially or professionally, economically or intellectually. But it's the poor people who will be most responsive to the gospel and most welcoming of us. Because we so often waste our time trying to impress people who are impressed with themselves, we need to change our perspective.

That is what James is championing. "Why is it," he asks, "that when someone comes into your congregation who is dressed in fine clothes, who has a name, or who is esteemed

highly, you give him the best seat in the house?" Oh, how we need to be aware of our own fleshly tendencies.

James 2:5-9

Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him? But ye have despised the poor. Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats? Do not they blaspheme that worthy name by the which ye are called? If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well: But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors.

It would seem as though whenever certain wealthy people who weren't part of the body made a guest appearance at church, they were ushered to the front and given the best seats. James, however, was not impressed.

James 2:10, 11

For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all. For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if thou commit no adultery, yet if thou kill, thou art become a transgressor of the law.

James goes on to say it's not only how we view others externally, but how we think about ourselves internally that matters. "Don't you realize," he asks, "that because the law is a single unit, if you say you've never committed adultery, yet you've murdered someone, you're guilty of adultery, too?"

It's like the space shuttle. The space shuttle is designed to go up into the heavenlies. But if any one part of it is not functioning properly or is flawed in any way, it won't lift off. So, too, you may not have killed anyone or committed adultery. But if you've lied, your shuttle is grounded.

James 2:12, 13

So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty. For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment.

Luke 6:38 is a verse often used in relation to the giving of tithes and offerings. But from the context, we know that when Jesus said, "Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye measure it shall be measured to you again," He was speaking not of money but of mercy.

In other words, if you are merciful to others, if you are forgiving toward others, if you are kind and compassionate with others, then when you need mercy and grace and kindness—and you will—it will be given to you. But if you have been harsh and judgmental, if you have been fault-finding and sin-sniffing, when you need mercy from others, there will be none for you.

James 2:14–26

What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works. Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only. Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

Arguing that faith without works is dead, the Book of James so incensed Martin Luther that the reformer called it “a veritable straw Epistle that should be thrown into the Rhine River.” Yet James proves that faith without works is dead by pointing to the example of Abraham. It’s not that Abraham was saved by taking Isaac up the mountain to sacrifice him in obedience to God. No, James says the work that saved Abraham took place years before that when he simply believed in God (verse 23).

When was Abraham declared righteous? As James quotes Genesis 15:6, we understand that Abraham was declared righteous when he simply believed God would do what He said He would do when He told Abraham He would make his descendants more numerous than the sand on the seashore. Interestingly, Paul would also point to Abraham as proof that man is justified by faith apart from works (Romans 4:3).

James and Paul are in full agreement because they both maintain that the moment Abraham simply believed God was the moment God imputed righteousness unto him.

It is not faith and works that saves a man. It is not faith or works. It is faith that works. All Abraham was doing on Mount Moriah was showing the reality of what had taken place in his life years earlier when he simply believed God.

If your faith is real, it will show itself. How? By obeying the Word of God and following the leading of the Lord, even though you may not understand where it will lead. At the time, Abraham could not have understood the significance of what he had done on Mount Moriah. But this side of Calvary, we see it was a perfect picture of what God the Father would do in sending His Son to that same mountain to die for the sins of the world.

You know you’re truly born again when you find yourself obeying God. We’re not saved by obedience. But our obedience proves we’re saved, for true faith works.

CHAPTER 3

In chapter 2, James stressed that mere words are not the issue. The proof of one's salvation is seen in works. Yet here in chapter 3, we'll see him plunge into a discussion about the tongue. Why? I suggest the reason is that, although it is true that it is our works and not our words that validate and verify our salvation, this does not mean words are not important in our spiritual life...

James 3:1, 2 (a)

My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation. For in many things we offend all.

James begins his discussion by saying, "Don't be eager to be a teacher because teachers can receive greater condemnation." Because it is inevitable that sooner or later we offend people with the words we say, the more a person says, the greater his chances of offending someone. Jeremiah certainly found this to be true....

When the people of Israel didn't like what Jeremiah was saying, they threw him into a prison—at which time Jeremiah decided he would speak no more. But there's a problem with those who are called to teach. As Jeremiah discovered, the Word of God burned in his heart, and he could not keep quiet (Jeremiah 20:9).

If, like Jeremiah, you are called to teach the Word, you will be unable to keep quiet, even though it might mean you're tossed into a storm of controversy or a dungeon of condemnation.

I wish I could say that all of the problems teachers encounter are due to the powerful messages we bring and the conviction they cause in the hearts of people. But that's not the whole story—not by a long shot! You see, greater condemnation comes to teachers because in the multitude of words there lacketh not sin (Proverbs 10:19). We who are always speaking inevitably say things we wish we hadn't said or in a way we wish we hadn't said them.

Thus, condemnation comes not only from other people, but from within our own hearts when we realize our inadequacy to communicate the Word properly.

"Be careful," says James. "Don't be too eager to be a teacher, knowing that you'll receive greater condemnation from within and without than if you sat quietly in a pew, taking it all in."

The longer I walk with the Lord, the more I see that the key to life is to learn to be content where God has placed you (Philippians 4:11). If you're called to teach, that's great! If you're called to listen, that's wonderful! In either place, contentment is the key and I believe that He calls us to be good at both teaching and more importantly listening!

James 3:2 (b)

If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.

Whoever does not offend in word is a mature person whether he is a teacher or not, for he who controls his tongue controls his life.

James 3:3–6

Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body. Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth. Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.

Just as surely as an insignificant-looking rudder controls an entire ship, or a little piece of metal controls a powerful horse, so the tongue, weighing a mere twenty ounces, can either bring direction or destruction—for truly the power of life and death is in the tongue (Proverbs 18:21).

What can we do to keep our tongues from being ignited by the fires of hell?

In Acts 2 we read of another tongue of fire, one which led to worshiping and witnessing. Therefore, I suggest that the more time we spend praying in tongues, the less time we'll spend preying on others with our tongues.

Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no talebearer, the strife ceaseth. Proverbs 26:20

When you hear gossip, pray silently in the Spirit to keep your tongue busy lest you join in the hellish discussion. If I listen to gossip, to put-downs, I am actually an accomplice in that fire ignited by hell. But if I refuse to listen and pray instead, the water of the Spirit douses the fire of hell, and the conversation dies.

James 3:7, 8

For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind: But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.

Here's the problem: In our own energy, we cannot tame our tongues. We need the Lord.

James 3:9, 10 (a)

Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing...

"Cursing" implies any words that bring hurt to someone.

James 3:10-12 (b)

My brethren, these things ought not so to be. Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh.

"We live in a pleasant area," said the men of Jericho to the newly anointed prophet. "But our crops are dying because our water is poisoned."

So what did Elisha do? He poured salt into the water, and the water became sweet once again (2 Kings 2:21).

Salt was to be poured into polluted water? Yes, because Paul tells us our speech is always to be seasoned with salt, that is grace (Colossians 4:6). What does this mean? It means that in any given moment I can bring healing to an otherwise poisonous situation by speaking grace. If I keep talking about how gracious God has been to me, and how gracious He'll be toward others, the polluted puddles of put-downs and pettiness will become pools of purity and praise.

I want this in my life so badly I can taste it. Oh, I'm far from what I should be—but I see the wisdom of James, for I've known people who have refused to listen to gossip and who have, instead, learned to speak graciously. There is a beauty about their lives and refreshment from their lives I so desire. If you want to be the man or woman God uses, join me in praying that we will be those who add the salt of grace to everything we say.

James 3:13, 14

Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom. But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth.

Come to terms with the fact that if your words are bitter, it's because your heart is bitter. Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks (Matthew 12:34). Bitter words come from a bitter heart.

James 3:15–18

This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and

good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace.

I have this verse underlined because it is a grid through which I can run any conversation, teaching, or any word of instruction. If there is envy and strife, tension and confusion in what I hear, then I know it's from hell. But if there is purity and peace, righteousness and mercy in what I hear, I embrace it as being from the Lord.

May God give us wisdom, and may our words as well as our actions reflect His goodness, His gentleness, His grace.

CHAPTER 4

James is not interested in how great we talk. He's interested in how straight we walk. After establishing this firmly in chapters 1 and 2, we saw him back up somewhat in chapter 3 to say that although what we say does not eclipse what we do—our words still make an impact.

"Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks," Jesus declared (Matthew 12:34). So here, in chapter 4, we'll see James deal with the issue of the heart.

James 4:1, 2

From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members? Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not.

The reason we put down other people, gossip about other people, fight with other people is because we want something from other people. It can be as stupid as thinking, Talking about that guy will make me look better to this guy. Yet the only way to get what our heart really craves is not to prey on others, but to pray to the Father.

James 4:3

Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.

"I do pray," you may say. "But I don't get what I ask for."

That's because you're asking amiss. Prayer is not giving orders. It's reporting for duty. And once a person finally understands that prayer is not man saying, "Bless the business; bring in the money; solve the problem," and God saying, "Aye, aye, Captain," his prayer life will be revolutionized.

Prayer is saying, "Father what do You want to do in my life? I want You to do what You see is best for me because I get mixed up so easily."

Sometime we act like monkeys trying to get a nut out of a knot-hole and it is nothig but a trap because as soon as we grasp it, there is no getting back out of the hole! We lie on our beds or kneel beside them and, through prayer, grab for things we think would be so wonderful, failing to realize that when we finally grasp our prize it leaves us stuck until we let go of it. Therefore, every bit as exciting to me as prayers God does answer are those He doesn't answer because I know I'll see that what I thought was so intriguing and tantalizing will prove to be the very thing that gets me stuck! Oh, that we learn not to give God orders or grasp things that we think will satisfy, but to do what Jesus did in the Garden: to submit to whatever the Father has for us.

James 4:4

Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.

Because the Father looks at the world system and sees corruption and danger, pollution and problems—if we continue to reach for the trinkets of the world, we'll be at odds with God.

James 4:5

Do ye think that the scripture saith in vain, The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy?

"Lusteth to envy" means "guards jealously." In other words, the Spirit of God that dwells within us wants the very best for us. When we talk about grieving the Holy Spirit, we must understand the Spirit is grieved not because we've hurt Him, but because—seeing what's ahead for us if we continue on the path we're on—He hurts for us.

If you're a dad, you can understand this....

Your sixteen-year-old daughter can't stop talking about him. So finally a week or two later, he shows up on his Harley in black leathers, he wrecks of marijuana, a woman tattooed on

his arm and it's not his mother, a patch over his eye, a flask of whiskey in his pocket, a Playboy bunny on his shirt, saying, "I like your daughter."

Although your daughter says, "Isn't he dreamy?" you know he's nothing but a nightmare—and that she'll be hurt badly if she gets on his Harley and goes down the road of life with him. (If it runs that long!)

That's how the Holy Spirit feels when He sees us getting on the back of some Harley we think is dreamy. He's not mad at us, not disappointed in us, not hurt by us, but jealous for us as a dad is for his daughter.

James 4:6 (a)

But he giveth more grace.

Even when I'm asking for the wrong things—grabbing for things in the knot-hole's or dreaming of Harleys—God gives more grace to resist the temptation and/or to recover from the situation because where sin abounds, grace abounds more (Romans 5:20).

James 4:6 (b)

Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble.

Although God has grace to give to us to resist the temptation or to recover from the situation, there's no room for pride. Who is the proud person? Barometers predict storms by measuring air pressure. Prayer-ometers indicate pride by measuring prayer pressure.

If I don't pray in a given day, it is the ultimate indication of pride because it is the proud person who says, "I don't need to pray about it. I can handle it." Oh, I may not be cocky like some UFC Fighters or Football Players but if I'm not praying, I'm every bit as proud as they are because prayerlessness is the truest indicator of pride.

James 4:7

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

How many of you have ever had a hard time getting to Bible study or Home Groups, but somehow got there? I commend you because had you succumbed to those pressures, you would have faced them again and again. You see, folks, because Satan isn't omniscient, because he can't read your mind or see into your heart, he's dependent solely upon trial and error to see what works. Therefore, if he sees that a headache will keep you from worship and Bible study, guess what will happen. You'll have headaches perpetually. If he sees that your kids acting up causes you to pull back, stay home, and not be where you should be, he'll have found the key to slowing down your walk.

I am convinced that many people experience unnecessary hell in their homes or trials in their lives because they don't understand this verse. They don't realize that if they resist the devil, he will indeed flee.

Behind the a rickety fence of a house I walk by regularly is two big gaurd dogs and a little squeaky rat dog. Every time I go by, this little yapper starts at one corner of the yard and snaps and barks at me the entire length of the fence. This stupid little dog is crazy I think to myself! Until it just recently hit me that the only reason he is yapping alongside me barking noisily was because he thought he was asserting his little rat dog perspectives over me. He thought he was winning by chasing me away. So he did this over and over again because he thought it was working.

Satan is the same way. He is a little rat dog! The Bible says that when we finally see him, we'll say, "Is this little yapping rat dog, the one who troubled the whole earth?" (see Isaiah 14:16).

How do you stop a yappy rat dog? By resisting him.

This morning, I just stopped and barked back at the yappy little dog. He put his tail between his legs, rolled over on his back, and started shaking while the othe big dogs trampled over the top of him. At that point the owner peaked his head out the front door while laughing and asked me politely not to bark at his dogs.

Resist the devil and he will flee from you—just as surely as did that little yappy, rat of a dog!

James 4:8 (a)

Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you.

One of my favorite verses in all of the Bible is Draw nigh to God, and He might draw nigh to you. No. Draw nigh to God, and He will sometimes draw nigh to you. No. Draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you. That's a promise! Don't let anyone cast criticism's on God's goodness or nature by saying, "I tried to get close to the Lord, but He is just so far from me." The Bible says He will draw nigh—always.

Many have said to me, "I've tried, but I can't seem to connect with God."

"I don't believe you," I lovingly answer, "because God's Word says He will always draw near to us if we draw near to Him. And I have found this promise to be true, for, without fail, every time I have been serious about seeking God, He has made Himself known to me through a Scripture, in my heart, or through the body of Christ."

Sometimes, we need to lovingly say to those who whine about feeling far from God, even though they claim they have tried to draw near to Him, "You're deceiving yourself, or you're trying to deceive me because God's Word says that if you take the time and expend the energy to draw near to Him, He will draw near to you."

James 4:8 (b)—10

Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded. Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up.

Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you. When? When you're serious about seeking Him. The idea is to be serious about it, to turn off the TV, to take some time and make an effort. Why? Not because God is saying, "Only when you mourn and are afflicted will I speak to you." That's not it at all. The purpose of mourning and cleansing is not so that God will speak—but to get me tuned in to the right frequency so I can hear Him already speaking. Think of it this way....

Right now, Fox News is broadcasting all sorts of words and images. But we aren't tuned in to the right frequency, cable company or channel. To get the picture, we'd have to take some time to have the cable or satellite company connected then we would set up our large screen TV, and set up the channels. Would we do that to impress Fox News to send pictures or news our way? No. They're already doing that constantly. We'd have to deliberate to get into the position to receive what's already being broadcast from Fox News continually.

If people don't read this passage right, they begin to say, "If we afflict ourselves like the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, if we slash our bodies and dance in a frenzy, God will speak" (see 1 Kings 18). That's not the heart of the Father. That's the heart of a false god. The purpose of washing your hands and humbling your heart implies quitting your normal activities and taking some time to get tuned in to the proper channel. Go on a walk in the cool of the day. Get away. Do whatever it takes to change your setting and say, "Lord, I've been tuned in to work. I've been dialed in to parenting. I've been positioned to pursue my hobbies. But now I'm taking time to hear from You because I know You're broadcasting twenty-four hours a day, and I want to hear what You say."

James 4:11

Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law: but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge.

What law is James talking about? The law of love. Galatians 5:14 says, "All the law is summed up in this one word: love." Jesus said, "Upon loving God and loving our neighbor hang all the law and the prophets (see Matthew 22:40). So here James is saying, "Don't speak evil of any brother or sister. If you do that, you're not obedient to the law of love."

James 4:12

There is one lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy: who art thou that judgest another?

One of the greatest days in my own Christian walk was the day the Lord whispered a very simple truth into my heart that changed my entire approach to ministry and to life. He said, "John Fairrington, you love 'em, and I'll judge 'em." You see, before that, I had it the other way around. I thought it was the Lord's job to love people and my job to judge them. I can't tell you how freeing it was to discover that I had it backward!

James 4:13-15

Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.

There are people who have tremendous confidence in what they're going to do because they think they have their future all worked out. But in reality, As of 2020, the CIA estimates the U.S. crude death rate will be 8.3 per 1,000, while it estimates that the global rate will be 7.7 per 1,000. In other words in a room of 1,000 people statistics indicate that two of us will not be here next year. Life is a vapor. It goes oh, so quickly.

James 4:16

But now ye rejoice in your boastings: all such rejoicing is evil.

Putting my hope in my plans, projections, or portfolio instead of in the Lord is not only foolish. James tells us it's evil.

James 4:17

Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin.

There are those who say, "I'm going to do this. I'm going to retire there. I've got my future all worked out." But when asked if they're going to church on Sunday or if they'll have devotions tomorrow, they say, "If the Lord wills." Do you see the irony?

"I'm going motorcycling next week, or on vacation in July," we say. But regarding connection with a body of believers whether church or home fellowships we say, "We'll see what God has in store." We have it backward! We should be saying, "I may go motorcycling next week if God wills. Or, I may take a vacation in July if that's what the Lord has for me. But as for connecting with the Body of Christ? I'll be there absolutely!"

That's why James says, "If you know what's right, but hide behind the excuse of waiting for God's leading before doing it, it's sin."

CHAPTER 5

Continuing where he left off in chapter 2, here in chapter 5, James attempts to do what his half Brother had done when He cleansed the temple, as he cleans house concerning wealthy people who had no real relationship with the Lord, but who simply liked to be seen in the midst of the believers....

James 5:1–3

Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you. Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver is cankered; and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire. Ye have heaped treasure together for the last days.

Because the language in verse seven makes it clear that he is addressing the true believer, James' harsh words here in verse three are not directed to true brothers, but to those who were only playing church. They are directed to those who thought they would be saved in the last day because of their wealth. They are directed to those who were using their money to be esteemed highly in the church.

James 5:4–6

Behold, the hire of the labourers who have reaped down your fields, which is of you kept back by fraud, crieth: and the cries of them which have reaped are entered into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. Ye have lived in pleasure on the earth, and been wanton; ye have nourished your hearts, as in a day of slaughter. Ye have condemned and killed the just; and he doth not resist you.

"You've made your money because you paid poor wages. You've made your fortunes at the expense of others," says James. "But know this: The Lord is hearing the cries of those you have exploited."

James 5:7, 8

Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain. Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts: for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh.

Shifting gears and addressing the true believer, James says, “Yes there will be injustice, rip-offs, and unfairness, but keep this in mind: The Lord is coming. He sees what’s going on, and He will settle the score.”

James 5:9

Grudge not one against another, brethren, lest ye be condemned: behold, the judge standeth before the door.

Salvation is not going to come through union participation or a Christian coalition organization. Salvation is going to come when Jesus Christ comes back. Stick to the big picture. Live for the kingdom. Be looking for His coming.

James 5:10, 11

Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience. Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy.

Job was a wealthy man. Then he lost everything. But if you read the last chapter of the book that bears his name, you see that he ended up with twice as much as he had before his difficulties began. Even his family was replenished. Why? Because he was patient. Yes, he had periods where he doubted and questioned God. But he’s an example of a man who endured difficulty and of one who was rewarded greatly. So, too, we are to wait patiently for the Lord’s return.

James 5:12

But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation.

I have heard of a man who was so determined to learn this lesson that once a week for over forty years, he took one day to fast from talking.

Truly, the Bible tells us that in the multitude of words there lacketh not sin (Proverbs 10:19). The more I talk, the more trouble I can get in. So James very practically says we are to keep our speech as simple and straightforward as possible.

James 5:13 (a)

Is any among you afflicted? let him pray.

What if we really believed this? What if we said, “I’m not going to speak so much or so quickly. I’m not going to hold a grudge against people even if I feel they’re afflicting me. Instead, I’m going to pray”? What a simple, workable, radical idea James presents to us.

This is hard for me because I want to mix it up verbally with those who afflict me and give them a piece of my mind. But I’m wrong every time I do because our fight is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers (Ephesians 6:12).

There’s no way we can continue to justify our tendency to fault folks or to war against them with words when James clearly tells us that the only solution to oppression is to look for the Lord’s coming. In the meantime, when we’re afflicted, we’re to watch our words. Let them be yea, nay, and by all means—pray.

James 5:13 (b)

Is any merry? let him sing psalms.

There are psalms for every occasion. That’s what’s so great about the one hundred fifty psalms in the center of our Bibles. For every occasion, for any situation, there is a psalm for us to sing.

James 5:14 (a)

Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him...

The affliction of verse thirteen is a mental, spiritual, or emotional affliction. The responsibility of the afflicted person is to pray. But the responsibility of the person who is sick physically is to call for the elders of the church.

"I was sick and none of the elders came to pray for me," you say.

Did you call for them?

James says it is the responsibility, the privilege, the opportunity, the command, for the sick person to humble himself and to call for the elders. Notice the word "elders" is plural. When the sick are being prayed for, it is always to be by a group of men and women corporately rather than one man individually. Why? There are few things more potentially dangerous than for a person to be used in the ministry of healing because what begins as a simple desire to be used by the Lord can so easily end up in book-signings and a speaking tour. To keep this tendency in check, James says when someone is sick, a group of those with the anointing to pastor, elder, bishop, minister is to pray so that no one person will get the credit.

James 5:14 (b)

...anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

What does it mean to anoint with oil? In Scripture, we see oil used symbolically, when, as an illustration of the anointing of the Holy Spirit, prophets, priests, and kings were anointed with oil before they assumed their positions of authority. We also see oil used medicinally, as in the story of the Good Samaritan who put oil on the wounds of the man left for dead (Luke 10:34).

I suggest that the anointing of oil spoken of by James refers to both the symbolic and the medicinal realms. It speaks of a person saying, "I'm looking to the Lord for healing. I'm

submitted to His will being done in my life; I believe in His power and presence—and I'm going to use His gift of medicine as well." There are two streams of healing: prayer and medicine. But it's the same God who works through both streams. Medicine does not heal. Prayer does not heal. God heals.

James 5:15 (a)

And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up...

What is the prayer of faith? It is not prayer offered due to working up feelings emotionally or hyping a congregation into a frenzy, but as a result of responding to the Lord personally.

No doubt Peter and John had passed him hundreds of times as he sat by the Gate Beautiful outside of the temple, begging for money. But one day as they walked by him, something unique happened within them that caused them to stop, look at him, and say, "Silver and gold have we none, but such as we have give we you. In the name of Jesus, rise up and walk" (see Acts 3:6). In the moment of the miraculous, Peter and John experienced faith unlike at any other time they had walked by this man previously.

So, too, there will come times when you're praying for your friends, family, or yourself when you'll suddenly sense God at work in a unique way, and you'll know a miracle is about to take place.

But what if you don't experience this kind of faith? Pray anyway.

I've prayed for perhaps hundreds of sick people over the years. A few were healed immediately. Others continued in their sickness. Many weren't healed until they got to heaven. Yet even if it doesn't bring about the full healing we anticipate, something wonderful and even miraculous always happens whenever a group of people talk to the Father.

It's good for a person going through physical suffering to call for the elders of the church to pray for healing—and to continue seeking healing until he is healed. Or until, like Paul,

he is at peace, knowing that God's will is being worked out in his condition, and that even in weakness, God is made strong (2 Corinthians 12:9). Don't allow others to change your narrative into one that says "They lack faith." These people do not understand how delighted the Lord is to have conversation with you!

James 5:15 (b)

...and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.

Sometimes, sin brings sickness. How do I know this? Because after He healed the lame man in John five, Jesus said, "Be careful that you don't sin lest a worse thing happen to you" (see John 5:14), implying that his paralysis was the result of a previous sin. So, too, when the four guys lowered their paralyzed buddy through a roof in the home wherein Jesus was teaching, Jesus linked the man's paralysis to sin (Mark 2:5-11).

Does this mean sin is always the reason for sickness?

No. When asked whether it was his own or his parents' sin that made a man blind, Jesus answered that neither his or his parents' sin was the reason (John 9:3). While sickness can indeed be a repercussion of a sin or a lifestyle, this doesn't mean that every sickness is the result of an individual's sin.

James 5:16 (a)

Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed.

Many of us have an obsession with confession. That is, we think that if there is any unconfessed sin in our lives, God will not hear our prayer. But I have good news for us today, for to us who understand that Jesus died for our sins past, present and future, regarding His work on the Cross, He doesn't say, "To be continued if you confess." No, He says, "It is finished."

James 5:16 (b)—18

The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit.

"Well, that wouldn't include me then," you say, "because I'm not Elijah; I'm not a righteous man, and I'm not an effectual, fervent pray-er."

You might be surprised....

James 5:19, 20 (a)

Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death...

The Greek word translated "err" is planao, from which we get our word "planet." It literally means "heavenly wanderer" and in this context refers to one who is headed for heaven ultimately, but is wandering presently. Those who "err from the truth" may, indeed, be born again. They may, indeed, have a relationship with the Lord. But it's distant because it lacks the connection that was there previously.

What causes a person to become planao, to become spiritually wandering?

Because at the heart of every problem lies a problem of the heart, I believe a person stops traveling with the body of Christ when a problem in his heart causes him to be uncomfortable in the presence of God's people. Such was the case with Demas. "Demas has forsaken us," said Paul. Why? Because "he has loved this world" (see 2 Timothy 4:10).

If you asked Demas about his absence, he might have been able to justify it doctrinally, saying, "I'm having a problem with Paul's doctrine of justification. I find it to be too grace-oriented. So now I'm just seeking God and getting instruction on my own."

Just as he did with Demas, Satan wants to see us disconnected, out wandering, cut off. But James says that if we convert such a one, if we get him to turn back and get involved once again, we have actually saved him from death.

What kind of death?

First, we have saved him from physical death (1 John 5:16). There is a sin, in which, if a man or woman continues to persist, God will take him or her home prematurely. If a person is rebelling against the Lord and walking farther and farther away from Him, such a one is in danger of being blown out into outer darkness. So God in His mercy may say, "It's time to take this person to heaven." While this obviously doesn't mean that anyone who dies before the age of ninety is out of fellowship, the Word does, indeed, declare that there is sin that will cause a person's life to end sooner than it would have had he continued walking in fellowship.

"Why should we try to convert such a one if he's headed to heaven anyway?" you ask.

The answer is that, although he will make it to heaven, he will enter in as though by fire, bankrupt spiritually, lacking the rewards that will affect his ability to enjoy heaven eternally (1 Corinthians 3:15).

Second, if we convert a brother who errs, who has wandered away, we save his soul from spiritual death. Because the wages of sin is always death, as you watch people who aren't plugged in, who aren't walking with the Lord as closely as they once did, you see death in their lives—the death of joy, the death of purpose, the death of peace. Their eyes become dull. Their faces become drawn. They start looking sad as they trade vitality for mortality.

Third, saving an erring brother from death could mean saving him from eternal death. The reason the debate has gone on for centuries concerning whether a Christian can go so far that he ends up forfeiting his salvation is because Scripture can be used to argue both sides. If this issue were cut and dried, a lot of people would drift farther and farther out in space. But because it is not, we have to realize that one's eternal destiny is at stake.

James 5:20 (b)

...and shall hide a multitude of sins.

The interesting thing about this phrase is that, linguistically, one can't be sure if it's the sins of the sinners that are covered, or those of the person who converts him.

Commentators are divided on this question, yet all I know is this: Every time I talk to someone who has wandered away, every time I see the unhappiness and emptiness of his life, I find myself turning, repenting, and hating sin all over again. Conversely, like the shepherd who found the one sheep that was lost, when I am able to return to the fold someone who was lost and wandering, I experience an explosion of joy within my own heart.

How are we to convert those who err, those who wander away?

First, we're to be men and women of prayer—we're to talk to God about people. Second, we're to be men and women who share—we're to talk to people about God.

After engaging in a real estate deal that resulted in the death of an innocent man, Ahab, king of Israel, was confronted by Elijah the prophet. "Because of what you've done, because the dogs have licked the blood of the man you killed, the dogs will lick your blood and the blood of all of your children," Elijah declared. "If they die in the city, the dogs will lick their blood. If they die in the fields, the birds will peck their flesh. You crossed the line, Ahab. You went too far. And your family's going down as a result" (see 1 Kings 21:19).

The account in 1 Kings goes on to say that after Ahab heard Elijah, he rent his clothes, wore sackcloth, and walked softly, stooped over, broken. Because Ahab humbled himself, God instructed Elijah to tell him that his family wouldn't be annihilated.

So here's the wickedest man in the history of the nation Israel, and what does God do? Because Elijah talked to him, he repented and God was able to show him mercy.

Talk to the Lord about people. Then talk to people—even if they're Ahab-like—about the Lord. Your own sin will be covered in the process—and you will save from death the soul of the one with whom you share. It's a tall order to be involved in the restoration of a sinner who was once part of the kingdom. It's also a great privilege.

The Epistle of James ends in a most unusual, but not very surprising manner. Most New Testament Epistles end with a closing benediction. Not James. There is no closing benediction. There is no doctrinal conclusion. There is not even a prayer of intercession.

In fact, in closing his book simply with a practical and pointed exhortation, it's as though James is saying, "I've given to you the Word of the Lord. Now go do it."

TRUE CONFESSION

A TOPICAL STUDY OF JAMES 5:16

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 1 John 1:9

I think many of us coming from church backgrounds have a misconception of the idea of confession. I know I did. For many years, I believed that if there was any unconfessed sin in my life, God would not hear my prayers. Consequently, I went through decades gripped by the “paralysis of analysis.” I knelt at my bed or by my desk trying to confess everything I did or thought that day or that week, wondering all the while if there was anything I left out, any unconfessed sin that would keep me from being heard by my Father in heaven—or, worse yet, which would prevent me from being forgiven by Him.

If, like me, you were ever under that impression, I have good news for you today: According to the context, 1 John 1:9 is not talking about you, but about those who don’t even acknowledge that they’re sinners. You see, in John’s day, a school of thought called Gnosticism propounded that because the material realm is not eternal, it doesn’t matter what a man does with his flesh. He can eat, drink, and be merry because only the spiritual is eternal.

This is the issue John was dealing with when he said, “If you say you have no sin, you deceive yourselves and the truth is not in you. But if you confess your sin—if you admit that you’re a sinner—God will be faithful and just to forgive your sin and to cleanse you from all unrighteousness.” In other words, “You cannot be forgiven, you cannot be born again, you cannot be saved until you admit you’re a sinner in need of a Savior.”

I don’t think many of us are involved in the gnostic heresy. We know we’ve sinned; we know we’ve blown it; we know at least one time somewhere we dropped the ball and messed up. And once we acknowledge this, our sin is forgiven—for on the Cross, Jesus

didn't say, "To be continued if you continue to confess." No, He said, "It is finished" (John 19:30).

This means that we can stand confidently in the presence of God—not because of who we are, but because of what He did for us on the Cross of Calvary.

"Okay, then," you say, "if that's true, then how do you explain the text before us: 'Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed'?"

Confession is not for the purpose of restoration to our Savior. Confession is for liberation from our sin. We don't have to worry about being restored to the Lord once we believe in Him because He paid for every sin we've ever done, are doing, or ever will do. The veil is rent. The way is open. The invitation is given to us to come boldly to the throne of grace to find mercy and help in time of need (Hebrews 4:16). It's a done deal. Thus, the purpose of confession is not for God's sake. It's for ours. It's not for restoration, but for liberation—to set us free.

CONSIDER FOUR WAYS CONFESSION LIBERATES US FROM SIN....

CONFESSON PROMOTES PRAYER

Confession promotes prayer. How? Confession produces compassion, and compassion produces intercession. Human nature is such that most of us don't pray very intensely for people we think are doing well. But because our hearts go out to those we think are hurting or struggling, we find ourselves praying on their behalf. Therefore, if you want people to pray for you, one of the most practical things you can do is confess your faults to someone or to a small group of people. Then watch how they'll pray for you.

CONFESSON PROVIDES PROTECTION

Confession provides protection from potential hostility. The Enemy seeks to cause whatever I'm struggling with, whatever you're wrestling with to be exposed. That's his method of operation. He sucks us into sin, then publicizes our sin to bring consternation, embarrassment, and division.

As Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost, Luke records that the other eleven disciples stood with him (Acts 2:14). Keep in mind, it had only been a month or so since Peter had denied even knowing Jesus. Thus, by standing with him, the other disciples were in effect saying, “We know Peter’s history. Yet we continue to stand by him. So pipe down, you who would be hostile and critical of him.”

That’s what confession does. It disarms the Enemy.

CONFESS PROHIBITS PRIDE

In the interest of accountability, three ministers gathered to confess their faults to one another.

“I’m sad to say this,” said the first minister, “but I’ve been struggling with whiskey. I just keep hitting the bottle after every service and every evening.”

The second minister said, “I must confess quite frankly that I’ve been struggling with women.”

The third minister said, “I confess I have a problem with gossip, and if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to make some phone calls....”

People say, “If I confess my faults to another, what will happen if they leak out?”

You know what will happen? Your pride will be destroyed, and that’s the best thing that could happen! Although we’re so careful to cultivate a certain image, the Lord has ways of making sure it never lasts because pride leads to destruction and a haughty spirit to a fall (Proverbs 16:18). Ask Lucifer. It was when pride filled his heart that he was cast out of heaven (Isaiah 14:12–15).

Confession prohibits pride, and in so doing, it breaks our otherwise tragic fall.

CONFESS PRODUCES PRAISE

The church of Jesus Christ is the only place I know where people come together and admit they’re a bunch of losers who have problems. Go to the Elks Club or Rotary or the

GOP fundraisers, and you're not going to see a group of people saying, "We're idiots. We failed again. We dropped the ball." It just doesn't happen that way! In every other organization, people get together to say, "Aren't we great?" But we, the church, come together to say, "Isn't God gracious? That He would use people like us with all our faults and failings is nothing short of amazing!"

Sin will lose its grip if you take seriously this command, this invitation to confess and pray for one another. Whatever you do, know this: You are forgiven and you can experience liberation if you confess your faults one to another.

I love the Lord. I love the theology of being forgiven. I love the practicality of confession. I'm so glad I'm saved. And I'm glad you are too.

All of us know there is power in prayer. Most of us understand that our priority is to be prayer. After all, we know that although the disciples observed Jesus raising the dead, healing the sick, feeding the multitudes, preaching the Word, walking on water, and casting out demons, they asked Him to teach them how to do only one thing. They asked Him to do the one thing they understood to be foundational to everything else He did. They asked Him to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1).

We, too, understand that there is power in prayer, that our priority is to be prayer—yet most of us have a problem with prayer because simple exhortations like the one before us become subtle intimidations to us.

In our text, I suggest the problem lies in three words....

EFFECTUAL

James tells us very clearly that it is effectual prayer that avails much—and uses a man named Elijah as an example of effectual prayer....

The first time we meet Elijah, he's storming into King Ahab's court, saying, "It's not going to rain but according to my word." Scripture records that the clouds, indeed, went away and no rain fell on Israel for three and a half years (1 Kings 17:1).

How could Elijah speak with such boldness? James tells us something we wouldn't know from reading the Old Testament account when he tells us Elijah prayed earnestly.

What does it mean to pray earnestly? The Greek word translated “prayer” is deesis, which means “to bow down.” The Greek word translated “earnestly” is proseuche, which means “to pray.” This means Elijah could speak to Ahab with certainty and could pray effectively because he was bowed down, submitted to the Scriptures.

You see, Deuteronomy 11:16, 17—a text Elijah would surely have known—says this:

Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived, and ye turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them; and then the LORD's wrath be kindled against you, and he shut up the heaven, that there be no rain, and that the land yield not her fruit; and lest ye perish quickly from off the good land which the LORD giveth you.

Aware of this promise, Elijah could say to Ahab, “Because of what you have done in this land by introducing Baal worship, it’s not going to rain.”

Time passed, and in a confrontation with Elijah, the prophets of Baal found themselves on Mount Carmel praying hour after hour for their god to send fire as they danced and screamed and slashed their bodies. Finally, Elijah said, “You’ve been going all day, boys. Your god has baal-ed out. Now it’s my turn.”

And it came to pass at the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice, that Elijah the prophet came near, and said, LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that thou art the LORD God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again. 1 Kings 18:36, 37

And, after praying this prayer that takes about seven seconds to utter, fire came down.

“Do not be like the heathen who think they are heard because of their much speaking,” Jesus said (Matthew 6:7)—and then gave us for a model a prayer sixty-five words long that takes less than fifteen seconds to say slowly. We think we have to impress God with

lengthy prayers and fancy words. Jesus says, “No, that’s the way of the prophets of Baal, the way of the heathen. Just talk to Me simply.”

Elijah knew the Word, was submitted to the Word, and prayed according to the Word. So, too, we must understand that to pray effectively is to combine prayer with reading the Word. You will never again snooze through a service or doze off during devotions if you are praying while you’re listening. That is, when a point comes to you that you know is convicting you, talk to the Lord about it right then.

For years, I didn’t know this. I thought the right way to fellowship with God was to read a chapter or two in the Word and then pray. But that is as silly as if I called Jaci and said, “We’ve got to talk,” and then I proceeded to talk for ten minutes straight—talk, talk, talk, talk, talk—before saying, “Now you talk”—at which point she’d talk, talk, talk, talk to me.

That’s the way I thought I was supposed to communicate with the Lord. “Okay, Father, I know You speak to me through Your Word, so I’ll listen, listen, listen, listen. Done. Now it’s my turn. Pray, pray, pray, pray, pray.”

I’m not saying you can’t do it that way, but there’s a much better way. That is, as you are reading the Word, a phrase or two will strike you, and you pause right then to talk it over with the Father. You pray about it right then. Then you read a verse or two or three more until something else stirs your thinking or strikes your heart. You pause, then talk to the Lord again. With tens of thousands of precepts, principles, and promises in this book, I guarantee you’ll never have a boring devotional time if you pause, then talk to the Lord again. With tens of thousands of precepts, principles, and promises in this book, I guarantee you’ll never have a boring devotional time if you pray with open Bible and talk to the Father about you read.

So, too, if you go to church on a Sunday morning or Wednesday evening and say, “Every time a point hits me, confuses me, or stirs me, I am going to pray about it right then.” Bible studies will never, ever again be drowsy for you because it’s just impossible to talk to the Father as you’re taking in the Word and find yourself bored and slumbering.

“If you abide in Me—stay close to Me—and My words abide in you,” Jesus declared, “you shall ask whatever you will and it shall be done” (see John 15:7). “If My Word is stirring in

you and you're staying close to Me, you'll be able to ask whatever you want as you pray biblically, and it will happen. You'll see."

To pray effectually is to pray biblically.

FERVENT

James tells us that it is not only effectual prayer that avails much, but fervent prayer. And, again, Elijah is our model....

After calling down fire with a prayer that took only five or six seconds to utter, and after telling Ahab it was going to rain, Scripture records that there, on the top of Mount Carmel, Elijah placed his head between his knees and prayed for rain.

"Any clouds coming?" he asked his servant.

"There's not a cloud in sight. It's clear and sunny," his servant answered.

So Elijah put his head between his knees again and prayed some more.

"Any clouds yet?" he asked.

"It's as clear as a bell," his servant answered.

So Elijah put his head between his knees and prayed a third time.

"Any clouds yet?"

"Nothing."

Elijah did this a fourth time, a fifth time, a sixth time. But when he popped up the seventh time, his servant said, "There's a little tiny cloud the size of a man's fist on the horizon."

"Great!" said Elijah. "Batten down the hatches! A storm's coming!"

And indeed it did (1 Kings 18:45).

If you lived in Bible times, you would know that to give birth, a woman would place her head between her knees. That's exactly what Elijah was doing. Prior to this, we saw him standing serenely and praying expectantly. Now we see him praying with fervency, with his head between his knees.

"But I thought we didn't have to go through contortions when we pray," you say. "I thought prayer was to be simple."

It is.

Then what's Elijah doing?

There come times, when in prayer I will go to the Father and I will pray like Elijah in the first example. I'll pray simply, casually, and comfortably. But the fire doesn't come down or the heavens don't open up, and I wonder why. I have learned that during such seasons, the Father is saying, "Pray fervently. Come back a second time and a third time, an eighth time and a twelfth time. Why? Because I know what's ahead."

You see, as the story unfolds, on the heels of his incredible victory on Mount Carmel, we will see Elijah fall into such depression and despondency that he will despair even of life itself (1 Kings 19:4). Knowing this, God says to Elijah, "What you need, Elijah, is not for Me to respond immediately, but to come into My presence repeatedly. I know what's coming—and you need to log in time with Me."

So, too, sometimes I pray, "Father, Your Word promises this..." and boom! It happens immediately. Other times, God says to me, "You think you need that relationship resolved or that ministry opened, or that financial matter worked out. But I see where you're going to be tomorrow. I see that what you're really craving is not what you're asking. You're craving Me. So come back three times, seven times, twenty-seven times, forty-two times and spend time with Me."

And you know what I have discovered, dear precious people? In coming back over and over with my head between my knees, so to speak, laboring and wondering, I find that

what I was so concerned about fades from importance, for I find in Him everything my heart desires.

What was birthed by Elijah that day on the mountain wasn't a rain cloud. It was a relationship. That's what it means to pray fervently—not to get God's attention, but to birth a deeper relationship with Him.

RIGHTEOUS

James tells us it is not only effectual and fervent prayers that avail much, but effectual and fervent prayers prayed by a righteous man. Again, Elijah is our example....

James calls Elijah a man of like passions—a man with the same vulnerabilities we have. That explains why, after calling down fire from heaven, and hacking up four hundred fifty prophets of Baal single-handedly, frightened by the words of a woman, Elijah ran seventy miles like a chicken with his head cut off only to end up in a cave depressed, discouraged, and defeated.

Here's a guy who's just like me. One minute he's up on the mountain; the next minute he's in a cave. One minute, he's victorious over Baal; the next minute, he's done in by despair. Yet James refers to Elijah as a righteous man. Why? Because in the New Testament particularly, righteousness is not dependent upon the way we behave. It is dependent upon what we believe.

How do I know this?

In Romans 4, Paul reaches back through the tunnel of time and grabs a name for our consideration: Abraham. Simply because Abraham believed God would do what He said He would, that God is who He declared Himself to be, Abraham was declared righteous (Romans 4:3).

Do you believe God? Do you believe the foundational fact of faith—that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died on the Cross for your sin and after three days rose again? Do you believe He is your Savior? If so, you are righteous.

"Oh, but you don't know where I was last year," you say.

Second Corinthians 5:17 says that if any man be in Christ—and you are—he is a new creation. Old things are passed away, behold all things are become new. Therefore, regardless of where you've been or what you've done, you're a new creation in Christ. You're righteous.

"Yes, but I have sinned greatly even after becoming a new creation, a believer."

Paul goes on to say, "And He made Him who knew no sin to be sin that we might be the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus" (see 2 Corinthians 5:21). That means God put our sin—past, present, and the stuff we haven't even done yet—on the Son. Therefore, if you are a believer, you are surrounded by Christ, covered with Christ, and washed by the blood of Christ. And you can't get any more righteous than that.

The effectual, fervent prayers of a righteous man availeth much. "Effectual," "fervent," and "righteous" are words that, unless understood biblically, can intimidate us and keep us from praying consistently. But once we understand their meaning, all that remains is to understand the word "much"—for "much" is what God has done and wants to continue to do in our lives as we walk with Him and wait on Him in effectual, fervent prayer.

Amen.