

George Philip Bible Readings

This resource is free to use for personal study. Copyright is reserved by the Philip Family.

THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

1:1	2:18-20	4:16-17
1:1	2:21-24	5:1-3
1:1	2:21-24	5:1-3
1:2-4	2:25-26	5:4-6
1:2-4	3:1	5:4-6
1:5-8	3:2	5:7-8
1:5-8	3:3-5	5:7-8
1:9-11	3:6-12	5:9
1:9-11	3:13-14	5:10-11
1:12	3:15-16	5:10-11
1:13-15	3:15-16	5:10-11
1:13-15	3:17-18	5:12
1:13-15	4:1	5:13
1:16-18	4:1	5:13
1:16-18	4:2-3	5:13
1:16-18	4:2-3	5:14-15
1:19-21	4:4	5:14-15
1:19-21	4:4	5:14-15
1:19-21	4:5	5:14-15
1:19-21	4:6-7	5:14-15
1:22-25	4:6-7	5:14-15
1:26-27	4:6-7	5:16
1:26-27	4:6-8a	5:16
2:1-7	4:8-10	5:16
2:1-7	4:8-10	5:17-18
2:1-7	4:8-10	5:17-18
2:1-7	4:11-12	5:17-18
2:8-13	4:13-15	5:19-20
2:8-13	4:13-15	5:19-20
2:14-17	4:13-15	
2:18-20	4:13-15	

1:1

Three men called James feature in the Gospel story: James, son of Alphaeus, one of the twelve disciples (Matt. 10:3; Acts 1:13) of whom little is known; James, son of Zebedee and brother of John (Matt. 4:21), one of the inner circle of three who accompanied Jesus on many significant occasions, and who was martyred by Herod, as Acts 12:2 records; and the third James, generally accepted as author of this epistle, who was the brother of our Lord. Along with others of the family, he did not at first believe in Jesus (Matt. 13:55; John 7:5). After the resurrection Jesus appeared to James (1 Cor. 15:7) and in due time James became the acknowledged leader of the church in Jerusalem (Gal. 1:19; 2:9; Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18). To fix the date of this epistle is not easy. This James died a martyr in AD 62. The Jerusalem Church Council referred to in Acts took place in AD 50 but in the Epistle of James there is no reference to the controversial issues raised at the Council and we conclude that the letter was written before then. We are dealing therefore with a situation around twenty years after the resurrection. The missionary work of the church was well under way, and the persecution of the Christians which had begun in Jerusalem about AD 44 (Acts 12:1 ff) was spreading widely. James was writing to Christians in various places who were facing difficulty and danger, and he speaks of faith, not so much in relation to salvation but in terms of dealing with the practicalities of life. If we keep this in mind we will be kept from thinking there is a basic disagreement between James and Paul. There are two sides to the Gospel: the believing side and the behaving side, and it is the latter James deals with.

[Back to Top](#)

1:1

Keep in mind that the thrill and excitement of Pentecost were past and Christians were now faced with the task of building the church in godless society and working towards the future. They needed both encouragement and instruction, and James, who was known for his deep devotion and wise justice, was the man to give it. He identifies himself as a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. He does not allow his family connection nor his position as a leader of the church to obtrude. In referring to himself as a 'bond-servant' he was using terminology that would register clearly with all of a Jewish background. The word refers to a full, glad and permanent commitment to a master on the ground of love and gratitude (Ex. 21:5,6). In his reference to the Saviour, James uses the fullest of titles, Lord, Jesus, and Christ, a tremendous testimony to the Divinity of Christ. James addresses his letter to the twelve tribes in the dispersion. He cannot be referring to unconverted Jews because he is manifestly speaking to Christians. Neither can he be referring only to Christians converted from a Jewish background, although at that time perhaps a majority of Christians were in that category. The 'twelve tribes' must be a reference back to the Old Testament, an identification of a people chosen and gathered together as the people of God, and an indication that all those 'in Christ' were to see themselves as the 'people of God'. They were not just scattered groups of believers. They had a clear identity. They bore God's name and were the instruments of His gracious purpose. In the Old Testament the tribes of Israel had often been persecuted and scattered but that did not cancel the fact that they were still God's people. This would be a word of encouragement, especially to small, isolated, persecuted groups of believers and those who were quite alone.

[Back to Top](#)

1:1

In living the Christian life three things must be kept in mind. We are not alone. We are in fellowship with all those who in every place call on the name of the Lord (1 Cor. 1:2). We are also part of God's saving work which has gone on a long time before we appeared on the scene and will continue to go on when our short lives are over (John 4:38). The third thing, which is what James emphasises, is that we are essentially strangers and pilgrims on the earth. We will always be scattered and in measure isolated. We will always be under suspicion in the eyes of the world because we do not belong. Being 'in' with Christ we are 'out' with the world and, as Jesus said, if we belonged to the world the world would love us (John 17:14-16). We cannot expect the unbelieving world to deal kindly with us when they dealt so wickedly with Jesus (John 15:18-20). We are exiles, strangers, away from home with no resting place in the world (Heb. 11:8-10,13-16). But if we are Christ's exiles in an alien world we need to be on guard. Read carefully in 1 Pet. 1:1; 2:11; and 1 John 2:15-17; 5:19. We dare not trifle with the 'spirit' of the world; it is too dangerous. But read also Eph. 2:11-13,19 and see

the difference between being alienated or exiled from God and being reconciled exiles who are now, in Christ, members of God's household family. Of course, if we are pilgrims on a journey through unfriendly territory then the company and companionship of other pilgrims will be precious indeed. That is why we must see to it that our churches become family homes where we have a sense of belonging and where our souls are fed with true spiritual manna to sustain us on our long and battling journey. To try to 'go it alone', as some do, is folly. It is also sin, because it despises what God has provided.

[Back to Top](#)

1:2-4

James now teaches us how to evaluate, to cope with, and to benefit from the inevitable trials that come upon us, and he speaks as one who knows what it is to 'go through it'. It is those who have suffered most who are most realistic and tender in their counsel and care (Heb. 2:18). James may be recalling the attitude of the early apostles as recorded in Acts 5:41. Of course, they did not *enjoy* being persecuted but regarded it as a privilege to be allowed to suffer for Jesus' sake. But it is a slightly different emphasis that James places on trials and tribulations. He says they lead to our personal spiritual benefit and our training and equipment for service. Those who have had war-service know something of the exhaustion of 'square-bashing' and the relentlessness of training, going over things again and again to make sure that, *as part of a team*, we would be ready for action. It is one thing to be steady and confident when all is going well. It is one thing to be spiritually minded and 'victorious' when there are no real problems. But it is when the 'crunch' comes that we discover just how real our faith is. There is good scriptural ground for saying that faith is refined and strengthened in the fires of affliction. Think of Rom. 5:3-5; 1 Pet. 1:3-7; Job 23:10; Isa. 48:10. Consider J B Phillips' translation of today's verses: 'When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, my brothers, don't resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends! Realise that they come to test your faith and to produce in you the quality of endurance. But let the process go on until that endurance is fully developed, and you will find you have become men of mature character, with the right sort of independence.'

[Back to Top](#)

1:2-4

While the main emphasis here is on how trials produce character, we must not ignore the fact that the battles and struggles have also to be interpreted in terms of service and witness. This is the theme in 1 Pet. 4:12-14. It means, of course, that the trials have a two-fold benefit. They produce results in us and through us, all to God's praise and glory. James may well be recalling the words of Jesus in Lk. 6:22-23 and, like the Saviour, James calls the believers to rejoice, just as Paul did from prison in Phil. 4:4. In a true biblical sense we are dealing here with the power of positive thinking. But we must not only *think* rightly about our various trials, we must *handle* them in the right way. We must not rebel against God's gracious disciplines no matter how painful they be. We must recognise that God deals with us as a father (Heb. 12:5-11). We must not frustrate or limit the process by which God is working for our blessing, sanctification and service. Like Paul, if our prayer for relief is not granted for God's good reasons, then we must yield gladly to His will, recognising that God's plan is to use us to the full (2 Cor. 12:7-10). Impatience and complaining in the context of God's dealings with us could well limit, or even frustrate God's designs, leaving us weakly immature. To say this is not to deny the sovereignty of God. Our folly can never be greater than God's grace. But it does say in Scripture, at a certain stage in the experience of God's people, that He granted their request and sent leanness to their soul (Ps. 106:15 AV). The testing should bring into evidence the 'hall-mark' of staying power (steadfastness) and that in turn brings maturity and a life equipped for service.

[Back to Top](#)

1:5-8

James was aware that some, perhaps many, of the Christians would find it difficult to understand what he was saying; hard to understand why God was dealing with them in this way; and hard to know how to cope. It is not lack of information or even knowledge that James is speaking of but rather lack of wisdom, in the sense of the capacity to accept, interpret, react to and cope with the demands of life without being given full answers. God does not always explain even when we ask earnestly, because we would not be able to cope (John 13:6-8).

George Philip Bible Reading In Book James

Perhaps what James is saying is, 'Go to God. Speak to God about it. Lay not only your situation but your heart open before Him.' James affirms that God is good and generous and kind. He does not reproach, find fault or upbraid (AV). He is not one to harp on about how undeserving or foolish we are. He is on our side. He wants us to understand but even more He wants us to trust Him when we do not understand, not least because this is a great testimony to His name. Wisdom comes as we learn what God is like. Read Prov. 1:7; 2:1-6; 9:10. The wisdom of the world is a very defective thing, as Paul makes plain in 1 Cor. 1:20-25. It is Christ who is made unto us wisdom, and everything else we need (1 Cor.1:30). We do not need to be ashamed to tell God we are confused. He knows, and He is not put off by our limitations. He was not even offended when a godly man, from the ground of faith, said under pressure, 'O Lord, you deceived me,' (Jer. 20:7). But we must speak only in faith, only in trust. We must not doubt God. After all, if He gave us His Son, will He not also give us all else that we need (Rom. 8:32)? We cannot doubt God's love.

[Back to Top](#)

1:5-8

James insists we must ask in faith. Is this an impossible standard? No! James recalls the words of Jesus about faith as small as a grain of mustard seed (Matt. 17:20). We may have doubts about ourselves and we may pray, as the disciples did, that our faith might be increased (Lk. 17:5). We may be totally honest with ourselves and with God and say, 'Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!' (Mk. 9:24). But we must not have doubts about the integrity of God, the ability of God or about the fact that God is set to help us. God is for us, not against us (Rom. 8:31). Whatever our circumstances and whatever our feelings the exhortation is always, 'Have faith in God,' (Mk. 11:22). There comes a time when, in an attitude similar to that of Job, we must say, 'Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him' (Job 13:15 AV). However, if we read v.8 carefully we begin to see that James is not speaking of what we normally call 'lack of faith' but rather of mixed motives. Sometimes we want to go on with God but some times we want our own worldly way. We want the benefits of real commitment to Christ and at the same time the pleasures of a worldly style of life in which we reserve the right to contract out of Christian duty when it suits us. In his devastatingly practical way James is saying that a professing Christian who blows hot at times and cold at other times cannot expect to receive anything from the Lord. In fact, he may *expect* to receive blessing but it will not be given. There is also the question as to whether or not such a double-minded man is a Christian at all. James was writing to Christians facing real persecution and while they had to be wise, they had to guard against compromise.

[Back to Top](#)

1:9-11

Our thinking is very important because as we evaluate things and people, so our attitudes to them are formed, and our actions are determined. This affects our relationships within the church and in society. We must guard against being worldly-minded (Rom. 12:1-2) not least because that makes us calculating, manipulative and even indifferent to others. It is only as we learn to have the 'mind of Christ' (Phil. 2:5), which is essentially a lowly mind, that we begin to deal with ourselves and others in a way that is pleasing to God. This is important in the church, where rich and poor, educated and uneducated, great intellects and lowly intellects, share a common life in Christ. It is a problem that can become acute in times of social pressure, economic stringency and religious persecution, and all these things were present in the situation James was writing to. Two important things need to be kept in mind. Our circumstances are in the hand of God and He can change things very swiftly if He so wills. There must therefore be an acceptance of our human state, and acceptance based on faith brings contentment (Phil. 4:11-13; 1 Tim. 6:6; cf. Prov. 30:7-9). This does not eliminate either legitimate ambition nor hard work by which we can advance in our circumstances. But it does put God first. The second lesson is that while poverty is a hard school in which to learn, affluence and the comforts it brings are a very dangerous condition, difficult to cope with and a constant hazard to spiritual life and discipleship. Read Matt. 13:22; Mk. 10:23; and 1 Tim. 6:17-19, and remember that in the church the poorest and humblest member is *necessary* and the gifted and capable members who may be rich in various ways cannot do without them.

[Back to Top](#)

1:9-11

Attitude based on spiritual facts is important. The brother from a lowly background and with limited education, capacity and finance, must remember that in Christ he has been raised to royal status and honour (Rev. 1:5-6; Eph. 2:4-6). He has been chosen in Christ and born again to a living hope and to a glorious inheritance (Eph. 1:3-6; 1 Pet. 1:3-9). Of course, poverty is not in itself a qualification. We must never be proud of being uncouth nor should we despise education as if it were a denial of spirituality. Neither must we assume that because we are rich, whether in cash, personality or social privilege, we are therefore spiritual and able to take a position of leadership. The rich man has to see that his riches count for nothing in the matter of salvation. He must humble his pride and come empty-handed to Christ if he would share in salvation. Riches in themselves are nothing and can in fact come between a man and his God. In any case riches are uncertain. They can be lost overnight (in a credit crunch for example). And in the real issues of sickness, sorrow, death or grief, riches are powerless to stave off the crisis or to comfort and reassure in it. If riches of possession or opportunity make us insensitive to God then we are poor indeed. Think of the stories Jesus told in Lk. 12:16ff and Lk. 16:19ff. Both men lost out eternally simply because they were too much influenced by what they had of this world's goods. Was James recalling Jesus' words about not laying up treasure on earth? Love of money, which can be the root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim. 6:10) can be a snare to the poor as well as to the rich and many a Christian has lost out spiritually simply because this world's attractions have proved too strong.

[Back to Top](#)

1:12

James makes very clear that trials in some form or other will always be present in the life of the true believer. What we have to do is to stand firm in the trial. What we must not do is to compare our trials with those of others because we do not know their circumstances. After all, what may be a sore temptation and conflict to one person may be simple and easy for another to cope with. The subject here is still outward trials coming from people and circumstances, and the endurance spoken of links back to the steadfastness of v.3. We begin to see something of the significance of being able to stand firm and to go on standing firm (Eph. 6:11,13,14). It signifies that 'by the grace of God, he (the man who endures) has the pure gold of heaven in his character,' (Ross) and he is crowned with the crown of life. Such a man has stood the test and is hallmarked as the real thing. He is blessed in himself, not least because, growing in spiritual stature, he knows more fully the God with whom he walks. He enjoys more fully fellowship with the Father, and drinks more deeply of the well of life. He is blessed also to others, and wherever he goes he brings a benediction of peace and joy and he inspires others to go with God. This is the blessedness spoken of in Psalm 1. The godly man is like a tree giving both shade and fruit to others. God's blessing never makes a man selfish or self-centred. Note that the crown of life is given not as a reward for suffering but because he loves God. The crown is life in its fullness, and this is not postponed until Heaven. Those who go on with Christ find life broadening and deepening all the way. Some people not only cope with all that life brings, they also carry with them a spirit of peace, joy and serenity. Their hearts are captured. They love the Lord. This is their life.

[Back to Top](#)

1:13-15

James has dealt with the battles and trials of life that are, in the providence of God, a means of grace. They test, refine, mature and demonstrate our faith, vindicating it as real. Now he deals with the battles that come when we are tempted to do evil, an experience with which we are all very familiar. When it happens we tend to blame others for dealing wrongly with us, or we blame circumstances, saying that we could not help it. Underlying this there is more than just a suggestion that we are blaming God for allowing it to happen. James insists that we must not do this, and he backs up his statement by a two fold affirmation about God (13). He testifies to the character of God. There is an absolute probity about God. The closest scrutiny reveals no flaw in Him. His righteousness is absolute in every way and this is the ground of our confidence in perplexity and in prayer. 'Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?' (Gen. 18:25). Sin has no necessary part in His scheme. It is not essential for the fulfilling of His purposes. We may learn many lessons about the grace of God through our sinning but God will never consent to our saying that sin was in any way necessary. All could have been learned without it. Sin is an intrusion into God's world (Rom. 5:12) and it is an offence to Him. He hates it and

cannot look upon it (Hab. 1:13). When He sent His Son into the world it was 'to do away with sin' (Heb. 9:26). James is very clear. God cannot be tempted with evil: He sees it for what it is. God never suggests we should do wrong. Our national poet was totally wrong when he said, 'But yet the light that led astray, was light from heaven.' (Burns) God is not in the business of leading people into sin.

[Back to Top](#)

1:13-15

We know that the author of sin is the Devil, and we know that he is always active, especially in the lives of those who follow Christ. In the account of the Temptation of Jesus (Matt. 4:1-11) the Devil was very active and yet found no weakness in response. Jesus was God's 'proper Man' and He had no natural propensity or preference for sin; no pressure or incitement to sin arising from past misdeeds; no mistrust of God or doubt of His good and perfect will such as was so manifest in Adam and Eve when they 'swallowed' Satan's lies (Gen. 3:1-6ff). It is not so with us. We can readily believe the Devil's lies and, since the human heart is deceitful and hopelessly diseased (Jer. 17:9), we follow the promptings of our own desire and are led into sin. When James uses the words 'lured and enticed' (v.14 RSV) a metaphor is used from the realm of hunting and fishing. The hunter and fisher know their quarry and know what will attract them out of safety. So it is with the Devil. He knows what we are like. He leads us into situations and into company calculated to trigger off the desires that will blind us to the consequences. Once the desire is kindled he simply waits for the result. If the words of James shake us, then we are ready to hear the good news of a Saviour who came to destroy the works of the Devil (1 John 3:8), to deliver those held in bondage and to save to the uttermost all who come to Him (Heb. 7:25 AV). He is able to keep us from falling (Jude 24) because the power of sin has been broken once for all (Rom. 6:10). But we must be realistic. The facts of a new birth (1 Pet. 1:3) and being raised to newness of life (Rom. 6:4) have to be grasped by faith. The victory has to be claimed.

[Back to Top](#)

1:13-15

In v.15 there is a tremendous warning against sin in respect of the first stirrings of desire and in terms of its progression and its ultimate consequences. 'Sin, when it is finished' (AV) brings death as its wages (Rom. 6:23). But what ravages it brings in ourselves and in others, not least our own nearest and dearest, before it reaches its conclusion. When Paul is urging believers along the road of sanctification in Christ Jesus he appeals to them to consider 'what profit they had in their former, sinful way of life' (Rom. 6:20-21). In every sense of the words, sin is a dead loss. It takes everything and gives nothing. The definition of sin in the Shorter Catechism as 'any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God' is not really sufficient because it limits the concept of sin to doing or not doing. But the real problem is what we are. It is because we have a sinner-heart and a sinner-motivation that we do acts of sin, whether in the gross or refined realms. Circumstances have a bearing on what we do. Neglect and pressure in early days of life have an effect on what we become.

Deprivation and lack of opportunity to develop life and personality also have a bearing on the lives we live. But the ultimate truth about us is that we are born sinners. The humanist cult of 'self-expression' can lead only to the fruit of sinners' propensities being let loose in society. In the mercy of God 'opportunity' is often denied to us. But the atmosphere of corrupt society contaminates and we are always in danger. We certainly need to be saved. We need a new heart: a heart in every thought renewed. And that is exactly what we are given in Christ.

[Back to Top](#)

1:16-18

Stern and practical as James can be, he is also tender hearted as the words, 'my dear brothers' 'my beloved brethren' (RSV) make plain. Seriousness in dealing with sin, with sinners, and with sinning Christians is not a denial of love but rather the opposite. No one who loves can stand by and allow a loved one to run into danger. The words of v.16 can be taken as an underlining of what has gone before or as adding emphasis to what follows. On the one hand James says we are to make no mistake about this, that sin is dangerous. On the other hand he is saying that we must be totally clear as to the doctrine, nature and activity of God. The earlier verses have emphasised the activity of Satan in bringing sin and its evil consequences into our lives. Now we read of the generous, unshadowed goodness of God coming down to enrich our lives in every way. There may be a link

back to v.2-3, recognising that even the trials that come to us are in fact blessings in disguise to lead us on into spiritual riches that we would not have been disposed to work for had life remained easy. When life is hard and baffling, it is easy to get cast down. When it seems that the battles and struggles are all for nothing it is easy to be tempted to give up. That is when we need a clear grasp of the nature of God such as the Psalmist expressed when he said, 'Truly God is good to Israel' (Ps. 73:1 AV/NIV). The Hebrew could be translated, 'Truly God is good and nothing but good to His people.' Think of the words of the hymn, 'Nearer, my God, to Thee':

'All that Thou send'st to me
In mercy given,
Angels to beckon me
Nearer, my God, to Thee.' (Adams)

[Back to Top](#)

1:16-18

God, the great Giver of all good, is described as the Father of lights. This may simply mean the glorious Father who dwells in light no man can approach (1 Tim. 6:15-16). It may also signify the nature of God who is light, and in whom there is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5). There may also be a hint here of the record in Genesis when God spoke and said, 'Let there be light'. These are themes taken up by the great hymn-writers, to whom we owe such a debt of gratitude.

'Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes.

Great Father of Glory, pure Father of Light,
Thine angels adore Thee, all veiling their sight;
All laud we would render: O help us to see
'Tis only the splendour of light hideth Thee.' (Smith)

How we need to recapture our sense of awe and wonder when we think about God and when we compose ourselves to worship Him. If we did, we would be less tempted to doubt Him and much less inclined to doubt His providences. In a world full of the deepest uncertainties, it is a blessing beyond measure to have the unchanging and unchangeable God as our rock and refuge. He is a God to be depended on and nothing can turn Him from His purpose of blessing, expressed in v.18. Awesome as He is, He is nevertheless the God who delights to draw His children to Himself, and if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with Him and with one another in an atmosphere that is totally healthy and health-giving (1 John 1:5-7).

[Back to Top](#)

1:16-18

We still have v.18 to consider in its three emphases. 'Of His own will, so to speak, putting His whole heart into it,' (Ross) God brought us to the birth in Christ. Note the contrast between sin bringing forth death and God bringing forth life (v.15, 18). God brought us forth from darkness to light, from death to life, and from the power of Satan unto Himself (Acts 26:18; 1 Pet. 2:9). God brought us forth from our former condition, from our brokenness and lostness, and from our complications and wandering. The agency of His gracious, powerful and ongoing work was and is the Word of Truth (Eph. 1:13; Col. 1:5-6; 1 Thess. 2:13; 1 Pet. 1:23). This is why we should be thrilled with anticipation every time the Word is preached and every time we sit under its gracious ministry and power. We never know what God is doing. He is at work when His word is being preached. That is why we must always heed the exhortation, 'Today, if you hear His voice, harden not your hearts,' (Heb. 3:8, 15; 4:7). But note finally that God's purpose goes far beyond our individual conversion and salvation. We who are brought to faith in Christ by the working of God's grace are 'first-fruits', the tokens of a fuller and final harvest yet to come, a harvest which will be gathered in its completeness, all to the glory of God. Paul speaks of God's plan for the fullness of time (Eph. 1:10); of the whole order of creation waiting for deliverance (Rom. 8:19-22); and Peter speaks of a new order of being (2 Pet. 3:13). In 1Cor. 15:24 we are told of Christ delivering up the kingdom to the Father so that God might be all in all. It is on this basis that we must learn to lift up our eyes to consider the sheer and glorious dimension of God's plan of salvation, of which we have been made a part *in Christ*.

[Back to Top](#)

1:19-21

The first sentence of v.19, like v.16, can apply to what has just been said or to what follows. James seems to be insisting that we should hold very firmly to what we have been taught about our salvation, its heavenly origin in the sovereign grace and activity of God, and its glorious extent in time and in eternity. It is a salvation that comes to us through the God who speaks His Word, and James begins here to urge us to recognise that the Word is to be received (19-21), to be obeyed (22-25) and to be expressed in life (26-27). Salvation is indeed a 'once-for-all' thing. When we hear and believe,

'Tis done! the great transaction's done!
I am my Lord's and He is mine;
He drew me and I followed on,
Charmed to confess the voice divine. (Doddridge)

But that is the beginning, not the terminus. We have to grow in grace (2 Pet. 3:18), to build ourselves up in our most holy faith (Jude. 20) and to manifest in our lives the things that accompany salvation (Heb. 6:9). To do this James urges us to be quick to hear, to be eager for ministry and to be hungry to learn. No matter how long we have been Christians we have only begun to learn the depth of the riches of God's grace. It is usually a sign of spiritual backsliding and human pride when we begin to be weary of hearing the Word of God. This has nothing to do with the eloquence or the personality of the preacher. When we are really hungry it is basic, wholesome food we need, not the elaborate and tantalising garnishing. Think well of these things before we come to grips with the details of the verses tomorrow.

[Back to Top](#)

1:19-21

Be quick to hear, to listen to God, to store up His Word in your heart, because it will keep you from sin (Ps. 119:11). Be quick to hear because so much is happening and the work is going on so resolutely you may well miss out on something vital. Be slow to speak. James will later speak of the dangers of a wrong desire to preach and the solemn responsibility of that in chapter 3. Here he may be thinking of situations where the handling of the Word is all speaking and no listening or learning. Some discussion groups are like that: a sharing of ignorance, or a mere airing of opinions. There may also be some references to situations referred to by Paul where Christians are on the look-out for teachers to suit their own liking so that there can be endless debates about mere words, and speculations as an alternative to changing of lives (1 Tim. 6:3-5; 2 Tim. 2:14-16,23; 3:5-7; 4:1-4). Very wisely, James follows his counsel about too much speaking with a warning against anger. Argument leads on to division, distraction from important things, and inevitably to denunciation. The end result is a fellowship divided and the work of God hindered while Christians lick their wounds, nurse their hurts or gloat over their victories. Very few can cope with anger. It can very easily lead to sin (Eph. 4:26-27). Anger does not work the righteousness of God. After all, when anger rages, we are focused on ourselves or on others rather than on God. We cannot allow ourselves to be in a blazing anger in the presence of God and if we choose to be angry then we choose to withdraw from God. In that case, the Devil has won a victory. None of us can ever be sure enough of our total innocence to allow ourselves to be angry quickly. Read 2 Sam. 16:5-12 and learn.

[Back to Top](#)

1:19-21

We are beginning to see just how very practical this epistle is. Following on the truth of v.19-20 James gives two commands, one negative and one positive. We are to 'put away', that is, to clear the ground of our hearts and lives of all that would hinder or choke the growth of the good seed of the Word. Consider Matt. 13:22 and Heb. 12:1-2. 'Weights' can be things that are good in themselves but are no help at all in the running of the Christian race. James, however, uses strong words and seems to be speaking to Christians who are tempted to trifle with things and with associations that should have no place at all in the life of a believer. These are the things that grieve the Spirit of God who looks for a clean heart to live in. These are the things that reduce our availability to and our usefulness to God, siphoning away our vital spiritual energy. This is the reason why

some Christians never seem to grow in grace, never show real signs of maturity and never come to the place of glad and sacrificial service. The word 'evil' (wickedness RSV) is translated in Col. 3:8 as 'malice' and some commentators suggest that James is here referring to Christians who nurture and maintain a wrong attitude of ill-will towards another. If this is so then what is in our hearts will be manifest in what we say to others and about others, and in the spirit in which these things are said. Such a thought leads us on eventually to chapter 3 where James speaks of the tongue being set on fire by Hell and doing immense damage to the people and the work that belong to God. We are dealing with attitudes and inward disposition and we need the counsel of the final words of v.21.

[Back to Top](#)

1:19-21

There is only one way to benefit from studying God's Word and from hearing it preached. Our attitude must be one of meekness. We must accept the Word without qualification or argument or resentment, seeking to hear what God is saying to us and being ready to apply the message to ourselves, whether for encouragement or correction. James speaks of the word of God as a dynamic seed or source of life planted within us and growing progressively to work out God's great salvation in our lives, personalities and characters. Of course, we must handle the Word wisely and well. Paul speaks of those who are always learning but never coming to a real knowledge of the truth (2 Tim. 3:7). Such people listen to every attractive voice and are carried away by everything that seems spiritual (Eph. 4:13-16), but they never grow up to be stable, dependable Christians. We must learn to let the Word of God dwell richly in us (Col. 3:16-17). It is a Word that works effectively in us and through us (1 Thess. 2:13). It washes us and keeps us clean (Eph. 5:26). It can keep us from sin (Ps. 119:11). It builds us up and enables us to take our place among the sanctified (Acts 20:32). The Word of God not only moulds our characters and enables us to grow in grace (1 Pet. 2:1-2) but it also moulds, guides and instructs our whole way of thinking so that facing all kinds of situations we think about them in biblical categories rather than along worldly, humanistic lines. How we should love our Bibles! But we must receive the truth rightly, else, after years of ministry, we remain spiritual children dealing only with the ABC of God's truth (Heb. 5:11-14).

[Back to Top](#)

1:22-25

In dealing with the Word of God, to give a response other than obedience is to deceive ourselves. James may well be recalling the words of Jesus in Matt. 7:21-23 and Luke 6:46-49. It is all too easy to hear the Word of God and respond merely in terms of an intellectual exercise or an emotional glow. Of course our minds are instructed as the Word is explained to us (Acts 8:26ff) and our hearts do become warmed as we meet Christ in the Scriptures (Lk. 24:27, 32). But this must be translated into the obedience of discipleship and service. James uses the illustration of a mirror to teach us realism. We can 'ask the mirror on the wall' to tell us what we want to hear, that we are 'the fairest and best'. We can use the Word in the way we sometimes do when we have a hurried glance into a mirror, not really being too particular about what we see. Of course we can also use a mirror too much, either to become self-preoccupied by what we look like on the surface, or to depress ourselves by focusing on every spot or wrinkle. Both these attitudes are totally self-centred, and when self is at the centre Jesus is displaced. But God looks on the heart, not just the face (1 Sam. 16:7) and as we respond to the Word of God, which is full of grace, our hearts are both sweetened and instructed. We see ourselves in rags but we see Christ in His glory. We see what we were and are shown what God plans to make us in Christ (1 John 3:1-3), changed from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor. 3:18). We begin to see that love so amazing does indeed demand our soul, our life and our all, and we are constrained by love to begin to serve. Remember that Jesus said, 'If you love Me, you will keep my commandments.'

[Back to Top](#)

1:26-27

James has been speaking of those who peer earnestly into the mirror of the Word, scrutinising its every detail, hungry to learn and finding real liberation of spirit (25). But there is a danger. Such a man, being very aware of how much he has learned but unaware of how little he really knows, may well become someone who talks too

George Philip Bible Reading In Book James

much. His religious life is all in his tongue, not in his heart, and he is usually so busy talking that he does not listen to God or to anyone else. In many ways our speech betrays us. Some people boast about their plain speaking but they do not like it when others speak plainly to them. The truth is that if our hearts are truly captive to Christ then our speech will always be with grace as well as with truth and it will lead to the blessing, encouraging and the building up of others (Eph. 4:29; Col. 4:6; Lk. 4:22). This is so different from blurting out words we regret the moment they are spoken; words that are half-true and calculated to destroy someone's peace or reputation; or words that are simply not true. Remember the example of Jesus who, when He was reviled, reviled not again. Consider these references - Ps. 141:3-4; Prov. 12:13-23; 21:23, 28; 1 Cor. 13:1; Matt. 12:33-37. Sometimes what a man is becomes evident when he is speaking to God. Jesus told of a man whose prayer was just a recital of his own virtues compared to others (Lk. 18:9-14). In Eccles. 5:1-6 we are counselled to be careful about making vows without considering the implication. A boastful young Christian was once cautioned in these words: 'Be careful what you pray for. You will get it.' God takes our words seriously.

[Back to Top](#)

1:26-27

James has been teaching that the Word has to be desired, received and obeyed. Now he says it must be expressed, but not just verbally, as if holy language was the same as true spirituality. Of course, if people never speak about God, or Jesus; if, after the preaching of the Word, people have no inclination to speak together about the sermon; if in our own homes we do not wish to talk together about the things that belong to Christ, then there is something wrong. We talk about the things we love and value. But spiritual talk that does not issue in practical service indicates something is wrong with our religion. There is no suggestion here that salvation can be gained by human care, social kindness and an abstention from worldly pollution. The 'works' that James speaks of are evidences of saving grace in the heart and life. If Christ dwells in our hearts by His Holy Spirit, then there will be expressed in our lives in some measure the practical grace and attractive humanity that we see in Jesus' earthly life. When our Lord looked around Him He saw people in need, like sheep without a shepherd, and He cared. He also valued them and dealt with them in a way that restored their human dignity and hope. He was indeed the friend of sinners who received sinners (Lk. 15:2) but He was also separate from sinners, never involved in their sin (Heb. 7:26). James is aware that it was, and is, the orphans and widows who were most likely to be ignored. Compare our practical attitudes to those we 'like' and those around us who are 'in need' and 'lonely'. Perhaps we just do not notice the needy and the hurt. They will try to hide their hurt by way of self-protection. But Jesus would notice. Christianity is very practical and very human.

[Back to Top](#)

2:1-7

James is concerned with the outworking of salvation, not just in personal life and character but also in the life of the church. It is assumed here that believers will gather together for worship (2) and James is insistent that saving faith should find expression in the way we deal with each other and value each other. This is where our profession of faith gets tested. You cannot really be a Christian and a snob. You may not and must not assess a person's value to God on the basis of his social, financial or intellectual standing. Nor must we ever think we are better than another (Rom. 12:3). The only things we can really claim as our own are our sinful nature and the sinful acts that flow from it. Anything we have that is of true spiritual and human value, anything we have become or accomplished, is the gift of God's grace. We have no ground for boasting (1 Cor. 4:7) and if, in Christ's church, we cultivate or show preference to someone because they seem to be rich or socially important, then we are sinning against God. If we despise the poor, humble, ordinary believer (who will be aware of it) giving him the impression that he is of no real value, then we are stealing the birthright of one whom God valued at the price of the blood of His own Son. There is no doubt that James is addressing himself to an actual problem in the life of the church in his own day. The rich and the well dressed were in fact being given preferential treatment. The people with 'personalities' were being regarded as better and more spiritual than the ordinary ones. But does not Paul make it very plain in 1 Cor. 12:12-26 that even the humblest member is *necessary* and that the body of the church cannot function properly without him or her?

[Back to Top](#)

2:1-7

James may be mindful of the fact that he was the son of a village joiner and that his divine brother had been a wandering preacher with no place to lay His head. He would also be mindful of the story of the widow's mite and of our Lord's evaluation of that humble soul's worth and service. No doubt James would also be thinking of such occasions in the Gospel record as Mark 12:38-44; Lk. 14:7-11; Mk. 9:33-37. Pride is a terrible snare. Note how James refers to Christ as the Lord of glory. Was not He the One who girded Himself with a towel and took the place of the lowliest servant in the household and washed the disciples' feet (John 13:1-15)? We need to remember that when we gather together in the faith of the Gospel we are gathering in the presence of the Lord of glory and there is no place for pride there; no place for showing off; no place for comparing ourselves with others; and no excuse for despising or excluding those we feel are 'less' than others. Nor should anyone ever look for place in God's House simply because they happen to be important in their worldly sphere. Let this mind be in us which was in Christ Jesus. He did not claim His rights but yielded them freely and willingly for us and for our salvation (Phil. 2:5-11). In His doing so, God was pleased. Jesus is our example.

[Back to Top](#)

2:1-7

It is important to see that James is dealing with the value judgments we make about people and the danger of assessing on the basis of appearance. After all, both rich and poor can dress in a way that deliberately sets out to attract attention to self. We must be balanced in our attitudes and in our language. Some speak today of 'God's bias towards the poor' but God's character is not biased in any way! We must not despise what is worthy nor must we idolise what is base. Our thinking must not be on a worldly basis, so that we lay great store on the conversion of some prominent social figure or some notorious criminal and count as of less importance the conversion of a shop assistant or housewife. Paul says that not many mighty are called (1 Cor. 1: 26-29). There are some, and if their capacities are given to Christ then they make good servants of the Gospel. But God has chosen many ordinary people, and their gifts and capacities, not least their sense of duty, make them good servants of the Gospel. There is great encouragement here. We may be poor, plodding, ordinary, even colourless personalities and perhaps failures in our own eyes, but in Christ we are heirs of the Kingdom (5). So also are the rich and gifted. But it is all of God's grace and not of natural merit. If we are strong and full of capacity, we are not to put ourselves on a pedestal nor allow others to idolise us. We are to recognise that our gifts fit us to be better servants of others (Matt. 20:25-28; Gal. 5:13-15). No one is ever saved by works, but a great and reliable test of people's Christianity is the extent to which they are willing and glad to work. In that case, some are not nearly as spiritual as they think they are.

[Back to Top](#)

2:1-7

It is not what a person has that counts, but what he does with what he has, whether we are speaking of wealth, intellect or opportunity. It is faithfulness that counts. Read Matt. 25:14-30 and Lk. 16:10-15 and note first that the master expected from each in proportion as they had been given. Note also that it is faithfulness in the small and ordinary things that indicates trustworthiness in more important spiritual things. Are we as willing to scrub floors and work behind the scenes as we are to preach or sing in public? These Daily Notes would be of no value to anyone unless many were willing to type, print, compile and post them. It is not a case of 'spiritual' work and 'ordinary' work. It is all work done for Jesus who gave Himself so freely for us. Let all who read search their hearts to see if they are doing their fair share of the slog of work that is necessary to keep a church going. The comment in v.6b-7 obviously refers to the situation in James' own day but we must recognise that those who regard themselves as 'rich' are the ones who tend to be most critical, demanding and unreasonable, even though they are Christians. They may not blaspheme in the strict sense, but they tend to reserve the right to be absent from the place of duty when it suits them and they resent when they are challenged about it. James has a great emphasis on believers who 'work' and one of the signs of grace is a willingness to fit in and to become a working member of the body of Christ. This will never be a denial of individuality for, like a mosaic, each part will be seen to its best in its place as part of the whole (1 Pet. 2:4-5). There will be no false modesty, holding back from the share you should take, nor a pushing forward into areas you are not supposed to be in. It is a matter of mutual sharing (Eph. 4:15-16).

[Back to Top](#)

2:8-13

James has been teaching us true doctrine and at the same time giving a sequence of tests by which our profession of faith can be examined to see if it is authentic. In this chapter he is dealing with our attitudes and actions in relation to people. The royal law of love must guide, inspire and restrain. Read Lev. 19:15-18 and 2 Cor. 5:14. We are under obligation to love, not least because we have been recipients of so much of God's love, often ministered to us by others (Luke 7:36-47). It is when we are aware of how much we have been forgiven again and again, that we begin to show the same kind of forgiving, caring love to others. Christian life is not a slavish obedience to rules of conduct but rather a setting free by redeeming love so that we can show to others the love that has been shown to us in Christ. We are not in the business of judging or criticising others (Matt. 7:1; Rom. 14:1-12) and, if we had to live with the circumstances others have to cope with, we would be far more tolerant of their failures and far more impressed with their grace and constancy. Love will never be in the business of looking for faults (1 Cor. 13:5) nor will love do wrong to a neighbour (Rom. 13:10). James makes a devastating statement in v.13 to the effect that a man who makes no allowances for others will find none made for him by God. This echoes Jesus' words in the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:14-15) in the parable of the harsh unforgiving servant (Matt. 18:23-35). Whatever else Christianity is, it is certainly practical, and it has to do with love. Read 1 John 3:11-18; 4:7-12, 19-21.

[Back to Top](#)

2:8-13

We return to these verses because James is not only challenging us with regard to our selective attitudes in respect of our giving eager attention to those we think are important and our neglect of those more humble in appearance, whom we really devalue, but he is also taking us to task regarding our selective attitude to sin. We seldom criticise or condemn people for the sins we ourselves sin. Some criticise adulterers on the basis of the Law of God but tend not to condemn those who gossip, trade in tittle tattle, and so bear false witness, even though that also is condemned in the Law. We criticise others for failing and falling in certain areas of life, knowing full well that these particular temptations are not a problem to us. That we are not tempted in certain ways does not mean we are spiritual. It is just that in terms of personality we are not vulnerable there. But unless we have kept in full the total requirement of God's Law then we are in no place to criticise or 'cast the first stone', read John 8:2-11; Matt. 7:1-5. Love does not make excuses for sin, but love will always be in the business of restoring the sinner (Gal. 6:1-2; Jas. 5:19-20). And love will always be mindful of the number of times the fallen brother or sister battled and struggled and did not succumb. It is the failures that become public, and love weeps over the fallen one. Love does not coldly condemn. But love that does not show itself, love that failed to speak or act at the right time, is not the love of Jesus which has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5).

2:14-17

Keep clearly in mind that James is not expounding the way of salvation but looking for the necessary evidences of salvation. There is no suggestion that anyone can be saved and get to Heaven by good works, by giving a cup of water in Jesus' name. But James is equally insistent that no one gets to Heaven on the basis of an empty beliefism. This is important, because evangelical Christians have been so concerned to emphasise that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone (Eph. 2:8-9; Rom. 3:19-24) that they have sometimes made 'good works' unimportant. James and Paul together make it plain that if we have believed and have been saved then there should be the evidence of a good and gracious change in our lives, because that is what we have been saved for (Gal. 5:6; Eph. 2:10; Titus 3:8,14). The faith that brings us to Christ is the faith that should produce in us Christlike behaviour, and if it does not do so, James says our faith is dead and vain. *Does* our faith make us work? What part of the ongoing work of the congregation would falter if you were not there? Would your absence be noticed or do your fellow Christians just not expect you to be in the place of duty and work? In a beehive there are drones and there are workers and in churches there are some who think themselves so very

spiritual that they never do anything. Sometimes we pray for people when what is needed is that we should speak to them and offer them friendship. After all, God's love became 'flesh' and lived alongside us. It was not theoretical. The Gospel has indeed a believing side and a behaving side, and what God has joined must not be separated.

[Back to Top](#)

2:14-17

Wherever there is a church there will be in some measure the blessing of God and it will attract all sorts of needy people. There is, or should be, a spirit of grace, mercy and peace wherever the Gospel is preached, but that does not mean all who are drawn will come to faith. Nor does it mean that all who speak spiritual language are in fact Christians. James certainly seems to be speaking of actual situations in churches where needy brothers and sisters were not being helped. Some who had the means and the opportunity to help were simply declining to do so. But faith should not be humanly heartless. Of course, there are words of caution in different places in Scripture indicating that scroungers who try to live off others are not to be allowed to do so (2 Thess. 3:10-12; Eph. 4:28). But in the early church there was a great spirit of eagerness to serve and a willingness to sacrifice even what was personal in order to minister to others (Acts 2:44-45). And Jesus Himself spoke of sharing coats and food (cf. Matt. 5:40-41; Luke 3:10-11). There are burdens that have to be shared, and others that have to be carried by ourselves (Gal. 6:2, 5, 6); but all our burdens can be brought to Christ (Matt. 11:28; Ps. 55:22). There is a wonderful balance in the Word of God in the whole matter of works as evidence of faith, not least if we look at Paul's words about money in 2 Cor. 8:8-15. We may not always be the ones who are in a position to help others. Circumstances can change so quickly and we can well become the needy brother or sister. We would want our fellow Christians *then* to be kind and caring. That is why we must be like that now. Do unto others . . . (Lk. 6:31).

[Back to Top](#)

2:18-20

There will always be those who choose to misunderstand these verses and try to make out that faith and works are equal grounds for salvation and acceptance by God. We have already been shown that this is not so. Faith is confirmed and demonstrated by good works, but good works do not necessarily prove that there is faith. Many humanists, agnostics and atheists do deeds of kindness, and their care for people in their need can shame some Christians. There are many people, some of them in churches, who quite openly will have nothing to do with all the believing, trusting and praying that is called for in the Gospel, choosing rather to be the kind of people who just get on with it and do things. Such people do not really think of themselves as sinners who need to be saved. They do not come empty-handed, without one plea except that Christ died for them. They do not have faith; only works. But, on the other hand, these humanitarian and religious unbelievers have grounds for criticising Christians for doing so little. Yes, we have a Gospel to preach but we also have a life to live and a service to render to the needy world for which Christ died. We must show the love of God in the name of Jesus Christ who went about doing good (Acts 10:38). In the hymn, 'Rescue the perishing' there are lines that say, 'Touched by a loving hand, wakened by kindness, chords that are broken will vibrate once more.' (van Alstyne) We must learn to care for people and not just to have a concern for the salvation of their souls. But, in caring, remember that they do need to be saved.

[Back to Top](#)

2:18-20

When some people are challenged about their lack of saving faith they reply that they do believe in God. They may even say they believe in the God of the Bible. They may claim to hold a sound creed. But that simply puts them on the same level as the demons (and the Devil) who believe in God (19). But the demons tend to be more realistic about their belief in God because they shudder and tremble, recognising that God is the God with whom they have to do. There are many people who say they believe in God but they do not take God seriously. They do not read their Bibles; they do not go all that often to church. Indeed, if all the churches closed down it would make little or no difference to their way of life apart perhaps in respect of Sunday mornings, weddings and funerals. But the man who truly believes in God knows that he must deal with God, that God deals with

him, and that without faith he cannot please God (Heb. 11:6). The presence of faith leads to a life of faith in which everything is done in relation to God, in dependence on God and by the grace of God. What James is challenging is barren orthodoxy, mere assent to a creed. Such religion is empty and barren and lacks the warm, gracious humanity of the Lord Jesus Christ. To follow up his argument James will go on to give two significant examples from the Old Testament. In both cases the emphasis is on commitment to God on the basis of trust in God. Abraham from a religious background did so in one way. Rahab in new-found faith did so in another.

[Back to Top](#)

2:21-24

These verses seem to highlight a conflict between James and Paul. Paul says a man is justified by faith alone (Rom. 3:21-28; 5:1-2) without the works of the law (Gal. 2:15-16). James here seems to say that a man is justified by works or by faith plus works. But both Paul and James take Abraham as an example. The reason is that they are proving different points. Paul is defending the Gospel against Jewish legalism that tried to add circumcision and religious observances to faith in Christ in order to be saved. James is defending the Gospel against those who said that so long as you believed it did not matter how you lived. Both Paul and James are insistent that salvation is something that must be expressed in practical terms in lives of moral worth and spiritual obedience. Martin Luther called this book 'an Epistle of Straw' but it seems more an epistle of light and fire because it searches our lives. Its words are needle-sharp. They call us to examine ourselves to see if we have authentic faith (2 Cor. 13:5). They remind us of Jesus' statement that you can tell true faith from false by the evidence of life (Matt. 7:15-20). Jesus also made it plain that faith is tested by what we do and by what we do not do. The words of Matt. 25:1-13 speak of those who profess faith but who are careless and forget the urgency of spiritual readiness. Then Matt. 25:31-46 speaks first of unselfconscious goodness and grace expressed in acts of human kindness, then of that self-centredness that simply forgets about everyone, being quite insensitive to the human need that is all around. A religious faith that does not express itself in every area of life is, according to James, worthless.

[Back to Top](#)

2:21-24

Abraham is held up as a great example of faith in Heb. 11:8-19 and in Rom. 4:1-3, 19-25. Both passages refer to the great act of obedience when Abraham offered up Isaac as a sacrifice even though it seemed that Isaac was necessary for God to fulfil His promise that Abraham would have descendants. The action was a tremendous evidence that the man trusted God, and Paul makes it plain that it was Abraham's faith that was reckoned to him as righteousness or justification. James says the same in v.22, making it clear that faith was there first and that faith was expressed, consummated or completed. 'Faith co-operated with his works and was perfected by them, we may say, as the tree is perfected by its fruits, which show that the tree is a living tree,' (Ross). James goes on to say in v.23 that the Scripture of Gen. 15:6 which declares that Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness or justification, was in fact fulfilled, expressed and vindicated in the Isaac incident recorded in Gen. 22: 1-14. Apart from faith Abraham could never have made this colossal act of commitment. He could not understand what God was doing. It seemed a contradiction of all God's previous dealings with him. But faith, if it is authentic, is prepared to stake its future on God. If Abraham had not acted in the way he did, then his faith would have been suspect. James says, 'You can tell he had faith by what he did.' The same 'work' and commitment of faith is seen in Job 13:15 AV 'Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him.' Faith that obeyed brought Abraham not only justification/salvation, but also a closer friendship with God. We must remember that, when life is hard.

[Back to Top](#)

2:25-26

The story of Rahab is in Joshua 2:1-21 and her actions are commented on in Heb. 11:31. Again it was faith causing and maintaining a certain course of action. She had heard of the deeds of the God of Israel. She recognised the spies as servants of that God. She risked her life at the hands of the authorities in Jericho by trusting the spies, by hiding them, and by believing what they said about the scarlet thread which was to be her guarantee of safety in the critical day. She acted in a way that made perfectly plain that she had committed

herself in faith. She was from a pagan background. Her life had been unsavoury. She told lies. She would at that stage not have been able to make much of a verbal statement of faith in terms of sound doctrine. But her 'works', her actions and attitudes, made it plain that faith was there and in due time she was accepted in Israel as a believer. The same kind of 'work of faith' (1 Thess. 1:3) is seen in the story of the Philippian jailer who, as an expression of his change of heart, washed the wounds of Paul and Silas (Acts 16:31-34). Three people, Abraham, Rahab and the jailer, different in sex, culture, privilege and religious training but having in common saving faith, confirmed and authenticated it by what they did. Note that it is specific actions that are spoken of and not just 'works' in general. In a sense each case had a crisis point, and is it not true that it is in the crises of life that it is revealed, by our reactions, whether our faith is dead or alive? Everything about Abraham and Rahab indicated faith. With lots of people, everything, including conversation and reactions, indicates that while there may be sentimental belief, there is no faith.

[Back to Top](#)

3:1

Just as you can assess a person's faith by their manner of life, so you can assess a person by listening to what they say and how they say it. James has already touched on this subject of the tongue in 1:19, 26 and we do well to read again Jesus' words in Matt. 12:36-37 and Paul's words in Eph. 5:4; Col. 4:6. Our tongues give expression to our opinions and convictions and also to the state of our hearts. Sharp, bitter, bad or careless words indicate a heart that is sick. When we say one thing in a certain way to one person and the same thing in another tone to the next person this may well be indication of a double mind and a double heart. Speech is significant and it is with preachers and teachers that James begins his probing exhortation. He seems to be aware of situations like that in the congregation in Corinth where everyone wanted to do the preaching. Now there is a fascination and satisfaction in preaching and in all callings that make you a public figure. But there is danger because prominence is hard to cope with without becoming proud, and if the preacher is gifted with eloquence and personality he will be sorely tempted to become over aware of himself. When that happens the preaching becomes a performance, and the focus is on the preacher rather than on Christ. The Gospel is then robbed of its power (1 Cor. 1:17) and the preacher is open to the rebuke and judgment of God. All who are ambitious to preach should remember this verse. James is very aware of it. Paul was also aware of this solemn truth and learned from God that the preacher is often hemmed in with sore trials, difficulties and oppositions in order to keep him usable (2 Cor. 4:7-12; 12:7-10).

[Back to Top](#)

3:2

In the realm of speaking we all make many mistakes, sometimes by talking foolishly when we should be silent and sometimes by saying nothing when in fact we should speak out. It is quite startling to find James saying that when a person has learned to bridle or keep under control his tongue, then he has learned to keep his whole life in subjection to himself and to God. Think how earnest Paul was to take himself to task and to bring every aspect of his personality into subjection to Christ (1 Cor. 9:25-27; 2 Cor. 10:5). This is the perfection or maturity James is speaking of. He may well have been thinking of the story of Moses who, under pressure because of the disaffection of the people he led, spoke rashly out of a bitter spirit (Ps. 106:32-33). Perhaps James was recalling the words of Jesus in Matt. 12:34; 15:10-11. Perhaps he was thinking of the exercise of heart shown by Isaiah in the presence of God when he cried out that he was a man of unclean lips, and wondered how he could be a servant of God (Isa. 6:5-8). The heart can be cleansed and kept clean by God's grace so that the tongue can be a wise and useful instrument. There is much to talk about that is good and glorious and encouraging, but empty talk demoralises. There is talk that is questioning in a way that is sinful. Why do we want to know certain things and why do we pass on things? Is it good to do so? Is it necessary? Is it helpful? Is it kind? We sometimes ask for a thousand tongues to sing our great Redeemer's praise but we also need to ask who controls the tongue we have.

[Back to Top](#)

3:3-5

Some people say with a laugh that they are always saying the wrong thing. But why should this be? Is our tongue uncontrolled? James speaks of how the rider can control a spirited horse by firm pressure on the bit and how the helmsman can control a great ship in a wild storm by a steady hand on the rudder. On the other hand a careless spark can start a forest fire which can rage far and wide. James is not talking about deliberate fire-raising, because that is done with a flaming torch and with highly inflammable material to encourage the blaze. People, including Christians, *can* do that kind of thing with deliberate venom. But here it is the careless, thoughtless word spoken in the wrong place at the wrong time that does the damage. How careful we must be and how we need the close companionship of the wise and balanced Jesus to check us when we tend to blunder. Just as we feel safe and less likely to be stupid when we are with wise friends, so walking with Jesus we are cautioned by His Spirit. After all, the fruit of the Spirit is, amongst other things, self-control (Gal. 5:23), and part of the evidence of growth in grace is self-control (2 Pet. 1:6). We tend to make excuses by saying that we were under great pressure when we spoke unwise words, the bitter comment and the angry criticism. But the illustration of the ship refers to storms and buffeting winds and yet there was control and no drifting from the true course. Think of these words of Amy Carmichael: 'A cup brimful of sweet water cannot spill even one drop of bitter water however suddenly jolted.' Jesus never spoke unwisely, and He has given us His Spirit.

[Back to Top](#)

3:6-12

It is difficult to deal with these words and in a sense they scarcely need comment. All that is bad, ugly, cruel and destructive in fallen human nature can be expressed through the tongue. It has vast potential for evil; it can poison our own lives and can pollute society and even the church. Like a forest fire it can seem to be extinguished and then with a breath of encouragement it blazes again with destruction. The tongues of fire burn, singe, destroy and spread in all directions. Any fool can start a fire but it is a big problem to put it out. Man has shown his capacity to master so much of creation but the tongue remains rebellious. Note the contrasts and contradictions in v.9-12. There is something far wrong if we can speak holy words to God and then bitter words to man. This ought not to be. It is sin, and it grieves the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:25, 29-32). A spring that produces fresh *and* bitter water is not to be trusted, not ever. You do not know what you are going to get, and it is like that with some people you talk to. Such a person cannot be right with God. The fruit that is produced tells all about the tree. Now, go back to v.8 which speaks of restless evil and deadly poison. It makes you think of the Devil going to and fro on the face of the earth (Job 1:7). Some people are like that. They are happiest when their tongues are prattling, sowing seeds of discord, poisoning relationships, criticising ministers, denigrating the work of a congregation and destroying peace. We go back to the question of who controls our tongues? The Book of Proverbs says a lot about the tongue, e.g. Prov. 12:17-20; 15:1-4; cf. Isa. 50:4.

[Back to Top](#)

3:13-14

James is still dealing with the subject of those called to teach (preach) and emphasises that what we are in ourselves, our attitudes and our inner dispositions, is what determines the worth and the effect of our teaching. We may claim to be 'wise and understanding', that is, to have a great deal of biblical information and doctrinal clarity, but that does not in itself qualify us to be teachers. The scribes in Jesus' day had detailed knowledge and could quote chapter and verse but Jesus warned against them because their lives did not reflect their own teaching (Matt. 23:1-3). Even in the very act of preaching and teaching there can be so much projection of a man's 'self' that no-one will hear or attend to what he is actually saying. If a person is too aware of his capacity it is doubtful if he is fit to be on a platform of any kind. We have to earn the right to be listened to and if our preaching is not first applied to and expressed in our own lives then neither men nor devils will respect or respond to us (Acts 19:11-20). Note how James says that the teacher's good life demonstrates his good doctrine. His walk authenticates his talk. On the other hand jealousy and ambition, which are self-centred, cause the teacher and his teaching to be false to the truth. Motives are important. We can covet the place and prominence of the teacher and the seeming power it bestows to gratify self rather than to make us servants of all for Jesus' sake (1 Cor. 9:19-23). On the other hand we can refuse to take our part in some work not because it is wrong in

itself but because in that activity we would not be important. We would only be one of a team. But we want to be the 'big fish'. We want to be first in prominence but not in suffering (Luke 22:24-27).

[Back to Top](#)

3:15-16

In dealing with those who are pressing into the office of teacher or preacher and claiming great spirituality, James is very aware that bitter jealousy and selfish ambition can be deep in the heart but camouflaged or hidden from view. Of course God knows, and God will deal with such people, sooner or later. We can be sure of that and consequently we must not allow ourselves to be distracted or distressed by them. These teachers may be very impressive and many will regard them as having great wisdom and being very spiritual. Of course there will be rivalry and boasting, for each teacher will be concerned for his reputation and will gather followers, just as happened in Corinth (1 Cor. 3:1-8,18-23; cf. Rom. 12:3). Far from helping the cause of God such persons are false to the truth.

'Yet who can fight for truth and God
Enthralled by lies and sin?
He who would wage such war on earth
Must first be true within.

'O God of truth for whom we long,
O Thou that hearest prayer,
Do Thine own battle in our hearts
And slay the falsehood there.

'So, tried in Thy refining fire,
From every lie set free,
In us Thy perfect truth shall dwell,
And we may fight for Thee.' (Hughes)

That hymn says it all. Read 2 Cor. 4:1-5 in the AV and see to it that nothing of self is allowed to hinder the preaching of the Word of God.

[Back to Top](#)

3:15-16

James will never be popular with those who are proud of their own spirituality and who seek to make use of Christ's church and His people to make a name for themselves. Wisdom in the things of God when it lacks true meekness is, according to James, the product of the Devil, not God. He describes it in three words. It is earthly in its motive and manner: it has no perspective of eternity. Such people mind earthly things (Phil. 3:17-19). They are essentially worldly. Secondly, this wisdom is unspiritual, sensual in the sense of being 'soulish', having to do with emotion, aimed at producing response rather than repentance. Its inspiration is not the Holy Spirit, no matter how much it seems to be so. Just imagine the reaction of the self-appointed, self-opinionated teachers on being told they were not spiritual! James would have a hard time and his name would be mud! But his name would be well thought of in the presence of God because he was set for the defence of the Gospel. Finally James says that these men have a wisdom that is devilish. They have not the Spirit of God (Jude 19) but they obviously have a driving and enabling spirit because they are 'gifted' men. But look at the results of their words and actions. They cause division, disturbance and denigration and all the other things that set Christians at variance with each other. You can always tell when the Devil is at work. The peace of the fellowship is disturbed and some innocent believers are made restless so that they are distracted from the work of God. Holy influence concentrates mind and heart on Christ. Unholy influence preoccupies mind and heart with people. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy and peace. The Devil likes none of that.

[Back to Top](#)

3:17-18

In contrast to the 'wisdom' that comes from Hell, the wisdom from above, with all its attendant benefits and blessings is now described, and we do well to examine ourselves and our contribution to the fellowship in the light of these words. This wisdom is first of all pure, in the sense of being open, transparent, easily read and with nothing to hide. Such persons are out in the open with God, walking in the light (2 Cor. 3:18; 1 John 1:5-7). It is wisdom that is peaceable in itself and in its influence, neither provoked nor provoking, but having always a healing influence. Blessed indeed are the peacemakers (Matt. 5:9). True wisdom is gentle, as Jesus was gentle but not weak, always sensitive to the feelings of others. It is open to reason, easy to be entreated, willing to be persuaded and winning others by persuasion rather than by confrontation. It is full of mercy, which is loving-kindness, and its fruit does people good. True wisdom is without uncertainty or insincerity, never shifty or crafty, and you always know where you are with people whose lives are monitored by true heavenly wisdom. Such people, being pure or single in heart, will have a sensitiveness that causes them to shrink away from all that is tainted, and they will influence others to be like-minded. This seems to be at least part of the meaning of the last difficult verse. The sower of peace brings righteousness and when hearts and lives are right with God, and God is pleased, then peace prevails in the individual and in the fellowship. In that peace the work of righteousness or salvation will go forward and many will be blessed. Jesus promised us His peace (John 14:27). It is the Devil who tries to take it away.

[Back to Top](#)

4:1

The previous chapter ended with the theme of peace produced, established, and reproducing itself. It is the fruit of righteousness. When the individuals who make up a fellowship are right with God and right in themselves, peace reigns. There are the storms and battles, wars without and fears within, but still there is peace because God is the God of peace. He makes peace and gives peace, and He is never the author of confusion or contradiction. How we need to ponder Phil. 4:4-7 and to learn at all times and in all circumstances to come to the great God of peace (Rom. 15:33; 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 4:9; Heb. 13:20). It is the Devil who works to destroy peace and he operates by the sword-thrusts and the subtle propaganda of the tongue. But the tongue is motivated by the passions or desires that war or campaign within us. The word 'desires' (passions RSV, lusts AV) could be translated pleasures, and that indicates a principle of self-indulgence, self-seeking, demanding and doing what our natural desires prompt without referring the issue to God. When we want something it is very easy to persuade ourselves that it is God's will and we shut our minds to advice and warning. Of course, since we are members one of another in Christ, when we are out of the will of God we introduce tension, division and disagreement. This is what James is referring to here and not 'wars' (RSV) in the civil or international sense. He speaks of wars or fights, wranglings and quarrelling, Christian bickering with Christian. These, he says quite plainly, arise from a wrong spirit within the individual. The flesh tries to assert itself against the Spirit. The Spirit claims the life for Christ but the 'flesh' demands its pleasure, refusing to die to self and to sin (Rom. 6:1-14). Self is greedy and wants its way, no matter who is hurt in the process. God is forgotten and the church is disturbed. How sad! How unnecessary, as James will go on to show.

[Back to Top](#)

4:1

This verse makes plain just how far from perfect the early apostolic church was. James was writing around AD 50 in the afterglow of Pentecostal revival, missionary outreach and church planting, and the Devil was furiously on the attack, setting Christian against Christian. The issue here is not theological argument in the interest of truth, although that was an issue in some places and at certain times, as Gal. 1:6-9 makes plain. Here it is a matter of Christians bickering with each other, striving for place and power within the church, and motivated by a carnal, self-seeking spirit within individuals. The intensity of the situation is revealed in the words 'wars', 'fightings' and 'passions'. People have got heated and when that happens rational thought is limited and Christian grace is swamped. Any outsider who comes into a church like that will sense the atmosphere and will conclude that a person's faith does not do much for them. James may well have been recalling the time when the disciples argued about place, priority and prominence, and were totally insensitive to the spiritual issues at stake (Mk. 9:33-35). We need to ask ourselves what influence and effect we are having on the congregation and

its work. If we are 'out of sorts' with God or with others we may well protest that we are having no ill effect. That statement may indicate that our presence is totally negative. We are doing nothing that is constructive: our contribution may be simply in terms of inspiring restlessness. Read Eph. 4:1-3; Phil. 4:2; Rom. 12:16-18; Titus 3:8-11, where Paul suggests that certain people were not converted.

[Back to Top](#)

4:2-3

The spirit of the world is greedy and discontented, and those who are Christ's, indwelt by His Spirit, must guard against infection by worldly atmosphere and worldly thinking (Rom. 12:1,2). The word translated 'passions' (RSV v.1, 3) is translated 'desires' or 'pleasures' (NIV). It is the Greek word for pleasures (from which we get our word 'hedonist') that James is using. We say this to emphasise just how careful we must be not to organise our Christian lives on the basis of the desire for and the satisfaction of 'pleasure'. Such pleasures need not be ugly ones, but simply the things that become obsessive and dominant in our lives, displacing Christ from His rightful first place. Jesus spoke of pleasures that choke the seed of the Word (Lk. 8:14), and Peter speaks of fleshly desires that wage war against the soul (1 Pet. 2:11). God is not against pleasure. Indeed, He gives us all things in rich measure to enjoy and at His right hand there are pleasures for evermore (1 Tim. 6:17; Ps. 16:11). But when the thought of pleasure is dominant it becomes a craving that outweighs all other considerations and both blinds us and makes us insensitive to the things of God. We may become ruthless, even in respect of those nearest to us, and we go further than anyone would expect in order to have what we want (2). There is a driving spirit which is linked to a discontented spirit which covets and is never satisfied. Then when we see someone who has what we have coveted and do not have, the bitter spirit of Hell gets hold of us and we fight and wage war, if only to destroy the other person's pleasure in what God has given them. It is a terrible picture, and a warning.

[Back to Top](#)

4:2-3

The remedy for self-indulgence and bitter, sub-Christian envy is in the realm of prayer. We submit our lives to God and we go to God with our needs which, of course, He is fully aware of and sympathetic to before we ever get round to praying (Matt. 6:8,32). But we cannot speak to God honestly if we are bitter in heart with another person (Matt. 5:21-24). The last statement of v.2 is a blunt rebuke from James regarding the prayerlessness of our lives. In every aspect of every situation, before the situation really develops, during its various stages, and after it has been settled and is giving way to the next situation, we need to learn the basic attitude of the Christian believer: 'Take it to the Lord in prayer.' Tell God about it. Spread it all before the Lord who knows, loves and cares, and who is the One above all others who is able to do something about it (2 Kings 19:14-20). But in v.3 James, with equal bluntness, rebukes the attitude with which we sometimes come to God in prayer. He says that we do not really want the will of God, nor do we want answers to our prayers that will honour God and advance His work. We want what *we* want, and we will do what *we* want to do, no doubt justifying our actions by saying, 'We have prayed about it'. Perhaps here we have some explanation of unanswered prayer and absence of guidance. We must never try to use prayer as a 'lever' to get from God what *we* want. There is a place for urgency and persistence in prayer (Lk. 18:1-8), and we must not stop praying too soon because all unknown to us things may be happening on a significant level behind the scenes (Dan. 9:23; 10:12-14). But we must not be presumptuous, for there is a *measure* of faith (Rom. 12:3) and there is a wrong insistence (Ps. 106:15). The wisdom of Prov. 30:7-9 is the wisdom of faith. It calls us to remember that God's will is good, perfect and altogether acceptable (Rom. 12:1,2).

[Back to Top](#)

4:4

James would never be a popular preacher because he spoke so plainly to Christians, challenging their spiritual shallowness and exposing it as being the result of worldliness. The phrase 'unfaithful creatures' (RSV) literally signifies an adulterous relationship which is a denial and betrayal of love and of vows. To be a worldly Christian is to be unfaithful to the marriage vows by which we were betrothed to God (Isa. 54:5; Jer. 3:20; Hos. 9.1). Some may protest and say that they do not go too far; but 'flirting' with the world is every bit as dangerous

as any other kind of flirting, and any marriage partner who indulges in flirting causes immense hurt and sometimes permanent damage to relationships. This is how James speaks of worldliness. It is spiritual adultery. There was a time in our land when, evangelically speaking, there was a lot of preaching about separation from the world and if someone professed to be converted there were many things they were *expected* not to do, such as smoking, drinking, dancing and cinema-going. No doubt the lines were drawn in an arbitrary way, but there was a recognition that worldliness was dangerous for spiritual life and discipleship. Other things were *expected* and converts, even those in early teenage years, were left in no doubt that they should be at the Prayer Meeting. Perhaps in some cases the standard set was too high and too rigid but it did lead to a generation of Christians who could be depended on and for whom Christian *duty* was a glorious concept. But so many of us now are so comfortable in material possessions, with lives so full of hobbies, interests and pleasures, to say nothing of socialising, that we have become friends of the world rather than of God.

[Back to Top](#)

4:4

Worldliness, pleasure, self-indulgence and self-will belong together. A worldly attitude influences and conditions our thinking about Christian things and there can be an eagerness and enthusiasm about worldly pursuits that is lacking in Christian commitment and service. It is a question of priorities and values. But it is also a matter of discernment and a recognition that the world and its 'spirit' are not neutral. They are opposed and antagonistic to all that is of Christ. Read 1 John 2:15-17; 5:19, and Paul's urgent call not to be conformed to or squeezed into the mould of the world (Rom. 12:1-2). Other references speak of the 'elemental spirits of the universe' (Col. 2:8 RSV) , 'basic principles' (NIV) 'rudiments' (AV) , and the spirit of disobedience (Eph. 2:2). Jesus spoke of the 'prince of this world' (John 14:30), indicating opposition, and Paul spoke of 'principalities and powers' and 'spiritual hosts of wickedness' in high and heavenly places. These are things that must be taken seriously, not least to remind ourselves that this world is not our home; we are pilgrims and strangers, just passing through. The people of the world recognise that we do not go their way, nor think their thoughts, nor live by their values. The world hates and is made to feel insecure by those who do not 'conform'. The world will oppose and persecute in order to try to make the Christians fall into step. Of course worldly people have no respect for Christians who 'tone down' their faith and commitment. But a true believer can have no respect for himself if he knows that he is 'keeping in' with worldly folk only by keeping quiet about God. Read Jesus' words in John 15:18ff.

[Back to Top](#)

4:5

We have such a tendency to concentrate on what we feel about things that we forget that God has feelings. Because He is the God of love, He commits Himself without reserve to those He loves and He looks for a like response of love. As we know on a human level, unrequited love, love that gets no response, is love that is deeply and grievously hurt. In this sense God is a jealous God, looking for and desiring the full response of the hearts of those who are His people. His heart burns with jealous longing when His own blood-bought people give their first affections, loyalty and dedication to the world. This is one interpretation of this very difficult verse. There may also be a reference to the Holy Spirit who indwells every believer (Rom. 8:11,14-16,23,26-27) and how that Spirit pleads God's cause within us, constantly claiming us for God, constantly reminding us that we are not our own but bought with a price (1 Cor. 6:19,20). Remember how the Spirit of God challenged one church about having left its first love (Rev. 2:4). Anyone who knows the pain of a broken romance, a broken marriage, or of having a prodigal son or daughter, will be able to understand in some small measure the pain that can pierce the loving heart of God when one of His own children plays false and gives his heart to another. One last comment should draw attention to the confident way in which James refers to the Scriptures. It is not clear what particular reference is meant but it may be Exodus 20:5-6 or Prov.3:34.

[Back to Top](#)

4:6-7

Over against the enticing and seductive claims of the world, which can find a response in the hearts of believers, there has been set the claim of God's love for total commitment. The standard is high but God gives

more grace. The same Spirit who claims us for Christ enables us to die to the claims of the world, the flesh and the Devil. Where sin abounded, grace much more abounded (Rom. 5:20), and by the power of the indwelling Spirit we prove ourselves to be more than conquerors through Him who loved us (Rom. 8:37). No matter the battle, God has promised that His grace will be sufficient (2 Cor. 12:9). But it is to the humble-hearted that God gives this grace. It is the person who is aware of his need, his weakness and his danger, who will look to God to find grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:16). Such men and women have the promise from God that they will not be tempted above what they are able to bear (1 Cor. 10:13). They will also be aware of a sensitiveness in respect of sin and will not take liberties. But there are some who are proud; proud even of their spirituality and far too sure of their strength and stability. Such people are seldom teachable. They do not like to be cautioned, let alone corrected. They are self-willed and opinionated. But they are in danger because God resists the proud. God sets Himself against those who 'fancy' themselves humanly and spiritually and who are a law unto themselves. This is a great warning against pride. It is also a great comfort which enables us to cope with the attitudes, words and works of proud people. We should not let ourselves be irked or distracted from service. Nor should we allow our peace to be disturbed. God opposes the proud. That says it all.

[Back to Top](#)

4:6-7

The affirmation and assurance of v.6 leads on to the two-fold exhortation of v.7. First, we are to submit ourselves to God; to leave ourselves in His hand; to look to Him with trust, believing that, whatever the circumstances and appearances, God is in fact working for our eternal good. If we are in Christ we are never victims of circumstances, because God is the Master of circumstances and in all things He is working for the good of His people (Rom. 8:28). This is why we must learn to cast our cares on Him who cares for us (1 Pet. 5:6-7). Time and again we must say to ourselves, 'Leave it to God,' (1 Pet. 2:23; 4:19). What comes our way is not accidental nor is it ever out of control. However dark or painful life may be, take the attitude of faith expressed by Job, 'He knows the way that I take,' and 'Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him,' (Job 23:10; 13:15 AV). But we must not make this idea of submitting to God too much of a grim challenge. When we think of just how much we have received from God of His loving kindness and tender mercy; when we look back and see how His hand has guided and His heart has planned for us from long before we were ever aware of His interest in us; when we recall the times without number that we have been forgiven and restored, and when we view our lives and personalities and see the enrichment, liberation and fulfilment that have come to us in Christ, in His service and in the fellowship of His people, is there any reason at all why we should hesitate to submit to God? 'Have Thine own way, Lord, have Thine own way, Thou art the Potter, I am the clay.' The Psalmist was right on target when he said, 'My times are in Thy hand,' (Ps. 31:15).

[Back to Top](#)

4:6-7

One thing is sure. If we are in earnest about submitting to God we shall have to learn to resist the Devil, because he does not take kindly to Christians who are set on going on with God. If we are to resist the Devil we must learn to discern his activities. He is an expert at creating tension and robbing us of our peace. He works often by accusing and tormenting about past sins. He seeks to drive us to extremes of self-assertiveness or self-abasement or self-punishment. He will do anything to take our thoughts away from Christ. The Devil is clever at making us think or at least feel that he is strong, when in fact he is a totally defeated foe (1 John 3:8; Col. 1:13; 2:15). There is therefore good ground for the command to resist the Devil. Like all bullies, the Devil does not know how to cope with those who stand against him in the name of Christ. How do we resist? One important way is by keeping clear of those areas of life, activities and associations where we know we are vulnerable. To do that we must know ourselves and our weak areas and that calls for honesty. Another important thing is to be aware that there *is* a Devil and that he will be active. Too often we forget, and when something suddenly shatters us we fail to recognise that we have been struck and impaled by one of Satan's fiery arrows (Eph. 6:16). We must be on watch (but not preoccupied with the Devil) and we must take a bold stand, keeping our thinking ice-cool and our hearts warm with thoughts of Jesus (1 Pet. 5:6-9). We must refuse the lies and the promises of the Devil and must be aware that he will come at us again and again (Lk. 4:13), especially when we are not expecting him. Be on guard.

[Back to Top](#)

4:6-8a

Resisting the Devil is, in one sense, the negative aspect of the life of faith, and drawing near to God is the positive side. Resisting without drawing near is futile. But drawing near to God has to do with the attitude and choice of obedience and not just a devotional exercise of worship. Right from the Garden of Eden Satan, passing himself off as pure, bright and spiritual (Gen. 3:1 ff.; 2 Cor. 11:14), tempted God's men and women to doubt God's integrity and to be uncertain of God's word. Satan can stir up and continue a spirit of tension and unforgiveness between Christians and so gain advantage over both the fellowship and the work of the Gospel (2 Cor. 2:10-13). Note in that last reference how the great apostle was distracted from his ministry by worry about some of his converts. This was a work of the Devil, as was the bitter clash between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:39). We see the Devil again in the sudden wave of irrational fear that assailed David in 1 Sam. 27:1 and in the depression and sense of failure that engulfed Elijah in 1 Kings 19:4ff. It is so easy to give place and opportunity to the Devil without noticing it. That is why we must be on guard in all our relationships (Eph. 4:25-32). A favourite technique of Satan is to get us preoccupied with comparing ourselves, and our Christian work, with others. Whether we end up feeling successes or failures, the Devil has won a victory because we have taken our eyes off Christ. [Back to Top](#)

4:8-10

There is a wealth of teaching in these verses which will repay close study. There is first of all a command, more than an invitation, to draw near to God. This is what we were made for and redeemed for. We are not our own in any sense; we are His, and our chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever (Shorter Catechism). It is true that God has put eternity in our hearts as part of our human constitution (Eccles. 3:11) and 'My heart is pained, nor can it be at rest till it finds rest in Thee.' (Tersteegen) But in speaking thus we must not fall into the error of thinking that God exists to fulfil *us*. We exist for Him, and it is His delight to draw near to us and to enjoy the company and fellowship of His own people. It is marvellously true that in Christ we are called to come to Him and to find ease for our burdens and rest for our souls (Matt. 11:28-30). But it is even more wonderful to realise that God is eager to draw near to us. He wants us. He would rather be near to us than far away from us, and to make this possible for disqualified sinners, God opened the way for us to come to Him. In Christ God dealt with sin, making peace by the blood of the Cross, and opening the way for penitent, believing sinners to come near into His presence in safety, peace, acceptance and blessing (Eph. 2:13,18; Col. 1:20; Rom. 5:1-2; Heb. 9:6-14; 10:19-25). We must not be distant in our relationship with God. He wants us before He wants our service and, like the Father of the Prodigal, the moment we begin to draw near to Him He runs to meet us, to welcome us and to smother us in His love and grace and goodness. This is fellowship, not only with God but with one another (1 John 1:3-4).

[Back to Top](#)

4:8-10

God calls us to come, but even before we are aware of His call He is at work in His grace constraining us to come, prompting and helping us to come. Our testimony will be, "And while I passed my Saviour by, His love laid hold on me." (B.E.) But we cannot take our sins with us into God's presence because there is no place for them there (Hab. 1:13). That gives urgency to the thought of cleansing, and again the God of grace takes the initiative in offering full and perfect forgiveness. God says, "Come, bring your reasoning to a close. Though your sins be scarlet: they shall be white as snow" (Isa. 1:18). James may also have had in mind such references as Zech. 13:1; Joel 2:12-13, and he recognises the danger of stopping at the outward rightness of life and discipleship (Mark 7:1-8). Of course God looks on the heart, and a pure heart is needed if we are to walk with God and do business with Him and for Him (Ps. 24:3-5). James is in total agreement with Heb. 12:14 for he is emphasising that without holiness we shall not see God. There must be no doubt. Sin is serious. So is hypocrisy. It is because we tend to have shallow thoughts about the sinfulness of sin that we react against James' words about being wretched (9 RSV). We Christians are far too insistent on our "right" to be happy in Jesus and as a result we tend to go for "easy" and instant forgiveness and for immediate rectifying by God of the unhappy consequences of our sinning whether in our own lives or the lives of others. We can sin against

someone, say we are sorry, forget all about it, and go gaily on our Christian way, oblivious of the fact that we have left the other person with a long and bitter struggle because we have opened wounds and created temptations. This needs more thought.

[Back to Top](#)

4:8-10

The New London Commentary points out that the noun "laughter" is found only here in the New Testament and the verb "laugh" is found only twice (Lk. 6:21, 25). It goes on to say that, the N.T. is a serious book and the joy it speaks so much about is the fruit of a serious dealing with the things of God. But we must not simply be serious about our own sins, we must be serious and realistic about the sins of others. Read now 2 Cor.7:1, 8-11; Ps. 51:1-17; Hos. 2:5-7,14-15. Whether we are dealing with ourselves or others we can sometimes be too quick to speak words of forgiveness and to assure that all is well. We must remember this even when there seems to be great distress because of sinning. Tears can be deceptive and may signify nothing more than an immediate emotional reaction to wrongdoing or to being found out. Both Peter and Judas wept bitterly but the issue was different. One man found forgiveness and a future of service. The other man was left in darkness. There is forgiveness with God and it should lead to a new seriousness (Ps. 130:3-8). There is a right attitude for sinners to have in God's presence, and it is one of deep humility (Lk. 18:9-14). The end is not to leave us in abject misery but that we should be lifted up again into the presence of God able to look at Him without clouds or shadows. We are not called to be morbid about our sins or to be preoccupied with them. Nor are we to be casual about sin, laughing at it with the cackling of fools (Eccles. 7:6). We are to look to Jesus, who was made sin for us and for our forgiveness. Those who do look begin to learn that, "They who fain would serve Thee best, are conscious most of wrong within." (Twellis)

[Back to Top](#)

4:11-12

James seems to continue the theme of sin in the life of a believer, applying it now to the area of our dealings with others. The theme is that of the censorious spirit that is quick to point out the faults of others and to speak against others in respect of their real or imagined failures. But the man of humble spirit, who has seen the sinfulness of his own sins, not least the ones that the public may never be aware of, will not be like this. There is no suggestion here that we should close our eyes to the wrongs of our brothers and sisters nor are we forbidden to rebuke or correct them when they are in the wrong. But James does refer to the wrong spirit that tends to forget and conceal its own spiritual barrenness by lording it over others, being a self-appointed spiritual mentor. This is sin against the law of love (2:8) and involves "setting up of our own tribunals in which we are prosecutor, witness, law, lawgiver and judge not to say executioner as well." (Ellicott) But it is God alone who is judge. We have no right at all to judge another in the sense of discrediting, devaluing and deprecating. We are back at Jesus' words about not judging and about criticising the specks in others' eyes, oblivious to the planks of defect in ourselves (Matt. 7: 1-5). Paul speaks of the same thing in 1 Cor. 4:1-5 when he was at the receiving end of loveless criticism from those who were supremely aware of their own spirituality. Of course they were not spiritual. They were carnal and graceless. If we criticise but never commend; if we rebuke but never encourage; if we take but never give, there is something very far wrong with our Christian lives. Remember, the one we judge is every bit as precious to God as we are. God may have serious thoughts about our criticising those so dear to Him.

[Back to Top](#)

4:13-15

It is difficult to identify exactly who James is addressing in v.13. It may be best to assume that he is speaking of an attitude to life that was prevalent among many, whether Christians, religious people, or worldly people. The message is particularly challenging to those who claim to be Christians, who profess to live in the light of eternity and the world to come, and who claim to be followers of Jesus who spoke so clearly about the danger of laying up treasure on earth (Matt. 6:19-21). It is easy to be so busy living and working that the things of the soul are simply forgotten. Think of the story in Lk. 12:13ff. Jesus was speaking of eternal things but one man heard nothing because he was totally preoccupied with money and the property he had been left, and which the

elder brother was taking too long to administer. There was no suggestion of any real wrongdoing on the brother's part nor on the part of the man building the barns. The latter was just so busy with his business-life that he forgot he had a soul to be saved. Some Christians are like that and we need to acquire the attitudes and scale of values Paul expresses in Phil. 3:7-11. But in today's verses (13) the words 'carry on business' (trade RSV) can sometimes have the meaning of cheating and exploiting. James may be giving a very strong hint that there are Christians whose business methods, standards and ethics are no different from those of worldly people whose only interest is to advance themselves by making money. "Accepted business practice" is a phrase that can cover a multitude of sins. The Inland Revenue and the police may never find out, but God knows.

[Back to Top](#)

4:13-15

Once in a Sunday evening service studying in James, we came to these verses on the last Sunday of a year. What a message they contain and what realism they call for in the living of our lives! We all assume we have many years left and that we will be well and able to make use of them. But opportunities may not be plentiful, either for pleasure or service. Our good intentions regarding Christian service may be frustrated by ill health or family commitments and restrictions. When young, life is full and another year is nothing. When twenty-five or thirty years are past you begin to wonder just what life is to be and to bring. As you get older you wonder where the years have gone and how many are left. Some people, even Christians, live as if they were never going to die, giving no thought to the salvation of their souls, or to their reward or loss in the world to come (1 Cor. 3:10-15; 2 Cor. 5:10). We must learn to live our lives in such a way that we will not be left with regrets. One man was compelled to confess that he had played the fool and erred exceedingly (1 Sam. 26:21). Another man of similar name was able to say that he had fought the fight and finished the course (2 Tim. 4:6-8). If our life is in fact the life of faith then we will live relating everything to God; doing everything as unto God (Col. 3:16-17), gladly accepting that our times are in God's hand (Ps. 31:15) and believing most surely that to be with Christ is far better than anything we can prove and enjoy here below (Phil. 1:23). There is a choice of faith to make between the pleasures of indulgence and the pleasures of walking with God and serving Him. "Fading is the worldling's pleasure Solid joys and lasting treasure none but Zion's children know." (Newton)

[Back to Top](#)

4:13-15

We can be so worldly in our attitudes that heaven does not have any attraction If this be so our treasure is in the wrong place (Matt. 6: 21). All we have, health, family, friends, job, holidays, hobbies, clothes, pleasures and everything else we lay such store by could all be gone in a moment. Even our Christian activities could be taken from us by ill-health. Think of all the disasters that befell the great saint Job and of the pitiful condition he was left in. In a moment of despair he spoke realistically of the shortness and uncertainty of life and the inescapable reality of death (Job 16:22). The Psalmist spoke likewise of our allotted span (Ps. 90:9-12) and the A.V. translation of one verse says, "We spend our days as a tale that is told." The story is being written, the pages are filled up and turned, and as the moving finger writes we cannot edit the account. The Book of Revelation speaks of the books being opened (Rev, 20:12), and in Dan. 5:23 God spoke to a man saying "The God in whose hand your breath is you have not glorified." What a. sad summary of a life, and how solemn when we think that it is appointed to men once to die and after this the judgment (Heb. 9:27). If the past troubles some, as it should (Eccles. 3:15AV), the present is also a trouble, for many find it a weary round of unsatisfying searches and hopes for fulfilment (Eccles. 2:11). What of the future? Many are tired of living and scared of dying and even scared of talking about it. For many death seems the worst thing that could happen and it signifies an empty unknown that is utterly negative. Dust to dust, sums it all up (Gen. 3:19). Apart from Christ all is loss. But in Christ the best is yet to be. It is life in its fullness, and it is eternal (John 10:10;11:25).

[Back to Top](#)

4:13-15

One man's answer to the question, "What is your life?" was, "To me to live is Christ and to die is gain." Such a man lives. as James counsels, saying with simple trust, "If the Lord wills," because he delights in God's will, recognising it to be both good and perfect. There are the perplexities, limitations, frustrations and demands that

have to be accepted in faith. Why God gives or withholds is a mystery that must rest in His inscrutable wisdom. We have to live our lives looking to Jesus (Heb. 12:1-2) and He is the same yesterday, and today and forever (Heb. 13:8). Our lives are not insubstantial and ephemeral with no significance, because our lives are hid with Christ in God (Col. 3:1-4). We have nothing to fear and everything to hope for. Our unchanging Saviour has dealt with all our past in His glorious and perfect forgiveness. It will not be remembered (Heb. 8:12; 10:17). The Saviour also answers all our "todays" because He knows all our feelings and temptations and is totally able to minister to us, if we let Him (Heb. 2:18; 4:15-16). The risen, exalted and never changing Jesus also guarantees our future because He appears in the presence of God on our behalf, even when we blunder and fall (Heb. 9:24; 1 John 2:1). What is your life? It can be a glorious pilgrimage in tremendous company, and with the Lord as our Shepherd we need not fear even the darkest valley. Read the whole of Ps. 23 and remember that the goodness and mercy come not only from the ever present Saviour but also from the friends of Jesus who walk with us. But remember that in fellowship getting is usually through giving.

[Back to Top](#)

4:16-17

Those who get on in the world, or who feel they have got on, can tend to become over-confident and a law unto themselves. They no longer manifest a spirit of humble dependence on God and in consequence tend to have an overbearing and patronising attitude to others. They may also have a somewhat casual or even cavalier attitude to Christian duty, giving the impression that they do not need to be so careful as others because they are "so well grounded spiritually". This, says James, is boasting and it is evil. We need here the wise caution of Paul in 1 Cor. 4:6-7. What would we be and what would we become apart from the grace of God that saves and keeps "wretches" like us? James challenges all form of spiritual over-confidence and then goes on in v.17 to challenge disobedience. His words are plain. It is not enough to claim, or even to have, a spiritual understanding and discernment. If it does not make us do what is right then we are living in sin and our claimed spirituality is shown to be false. Think of Jesus' words: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). Think of Paul's words: "Whatever is not of faith is sin," (Rom. 14:23). Note how James puts his challenge in terms of sins of omission. He speaks of what we are not doing. God reveals His will to us and the Spirit of God within us urges us to go on and to do it, to set our priorities and to accept our duties gladly. If we fail to do so we are involved in serious sin. These words of James are particularly applicable to those who have been on the Christian way a long time, who have sat under true ministry a long time and who have been blessed richly by God. We can take it all for granted and end up being "too spiritual," having a name for being holy and dedicated but being in fact far from grace.

[Back to Top](#)

5:1-3

Having challenged Christians in terms of spiritual self-confidence (4:13-16) and having rebuked them in terms of disobedience and failure to serve (4:17), James now challenges in terms of the selfishness that so often goes along with riches, whether these riches are measured in terms of cash, time, talent or personality. The important thing is not how much we have but what we do with it, and what we are in the process of becoming as a result of what we have. Poverty can make a man bitter or proud, or both. Riches can make a man proud, hard and insensitive. Think of Jesus' story in Lk. 16:19ff. It was the man's riches, leading to an indulgent life-style, that made him oblivious of human need right at his door, and insensitive to the eternal well being of his own soul. Here was a man who, as James says, had laid up or heaped up wealth which became like fire at the last day. The description James gives of rotting, rusting and decaying riches reflects vividly Jesus' words in Matt. 6:19-21 and we are left in no doubt as to the miserably unhappy end to such lives. James is not preoccupied with riches and rich people (although some are) and he does not consider that people rich in money, gifts, place and prominence are necessarily either spiritual or not spiritual. He is simply an observer of lives and he sees what is happening to people as he watches over the church of Christ. It seems he is referring to rich unbelievers who persecute the church, but the principal lessons we have outlined in this note apply equally well to complacent Christians who can often be quite harsh and bitter in their treatment of quiet, dutiful believers.

[Back to Top](#)

5:1-3

James says a lot about rich people and their riches. In 1:10 the rich man is clearly a believer but in 2:2 the rich visitor could well be an unbeliever regarded as a "desirable" convert, a prominent "scalp" to boast about. In 2:6 the rich are almost certainly unbelievers with a ruthless attitude to Christians, and in today's verses the rich are clearly greedy, money-grabbing people and we assume they are unbelievers. But are there no greedy Christians whose main aim in life is to acquire more and more and who put their careers before their commitment to Christ and His service? But think of this issue of riches on a wider, practical level. Some people have hours and patterns of work that leave them little time or energy to do much else. Yet, whenever opportunity arises, they are found giving someone in need hospitality, inviting a lonely student or overseas person for a meal or offering to baby-sit to let a harassed mother out to church. Others who may think they are busy but who in fact have time to themselves, lots of interests and friends and homes of a size that can cope with visitors seldom if ever use their varied "riches" to minister to others. They would not miss a service to let a needy one get to church. They would not offer to baby-sit. They would not ask a lonely soul to come for an evening and perhaps to share in the blessings and hassle of a family with little children. If they do entertain, it is their own friends who are invited because that adds to their own enjoyment. Such people taking in all the time and growing rich, find their "riches" going stale and rusty. There is no outflow, and, like the Dead Sea, they become dead. Their poverty shows through their riches. How sad! Read Lk. 6:37-38 and Prov. 11:24.

[Back to Top](#)

5:4-6

James now addresses his challenge to those whose riches are tainted. If we think these words could not be applied to Christians, consider the words of a Christian lecturer in Economics at the University of Glasgow who commented on a man who was a great supporter of evangelical causes saying, "He paid his workers less than any other yard on the Clyde." But we could apply the words to the Lord's labourers on the mission field who at times do not even get the full amount of what is already a small maintenance allowance. What ever the sphere of labour, be it in Christian work or secular work, if we do wrongly by those who are our responsibility, our attitudes and actions come up before God for judgment. James may be thinking of the story of Cain and Abel (Gen. 4:10) and of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18: 20-21) where in each case the cry of inhuman and wicked dealing rose up to the ears of God, and God called the people concerned to a day of reckoning. It is difficult to be a good employer because God sets the standard high. The question of lazy and incompetent workers is a different subject and does not come into today's verses but is spoken of in such passages as Eph. 4:28; 1 Thess. 4:11-12; 2 Thess. 3:8, 10-12; Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1. In the Old Testament the prophets spoke sternly and searchingly to those who did wrongly by their fellows and God's Law provided that at harvest certain areas of the field were left for the poor to glean. While we should not talk about God being "biased" towards the poor, since God's character is totally balanced, we are left in no doubt that God is against those who do not do rightly by their fellows, especially their paid workers.

[Back to Top](#)

5:4-6

It is difficult to apply these verses to Christians, especially in some of the details, but they do bring us face to face with what is a constant danger to all of us. James is speaking of those whose lives are marked by indulgence, who deliberately adopt a life-style that is far above and beyond what is really needed. In a generation like ours when spending is obsessive, over eating almost an addiction and waste of food and clothing (to say nothing of luxury items) is evident on all sides, we need to heed this warning. In v.5 it is clear that luxury and pleasure have a dire effect on human feelings and lead to indifference and callousness in dealing with others. In biblical terms, when hearts are fat or hard there has come into life a carelessness, complacency and hardness in the realm of spiritual things. Many a Christian would confess that in the early days of life, when it was a struggle to get established in a career and when money was scarce, their spiritual lives, especially in terms of prayer, were much more vital and realistic than now when creature comforts abound. Note James' reference in v.5 to "on the earth" for it signifies a worldly materialistic attitude. "This world's empty glory is costing me too dear" could well be the testimony of some who read these words. The final challenge of v.6 concerns some great men of God who have been killed by the heartless rich. This does not belong to the distant

past. Not a few godly servants of the Gospel have had their hearts broken and their spirits killed by the indifference and neglect of Christians who owed them a great debt of gratitude.

[Back to Top](#)

5:7-8

As we get within sight of the end of this epistle we remind ourselves of its main thrust. Christian life is the life of faith, and if faith is present it will show. Faith must be expressed in the practical business of life and it is thereby authenticated. No profession of faith should automatically be taken at face value. James has shown that faith can be tested. It needs instruction, correction and encouragement so that it will grow stronger and stronger. It is not surprising then that James now turns to the theme of patience (5:5-11) and then prayer (5:13-18). He has been dealing with the pressures and injustices of life, the frustrations and denials of experience, and these are the very things which, according to Paul, are a means of grace whereby patience, endurance and character are produced in the lives of believers. Read Rom. 5:1-5 and then, since James goes on to use an illustration from the life of the farmer, read 2 Pet. 1:3-11 where the idea of supplementing faith has in it the thought of growing and developing. It is not something that can be rushed. Growth in grace takes time and growth to maturity and completeness in God's work takes time. There is a process at work which, in the life of the farmer, was dependent in Bible times on the *two* seasons of rain, as James' readers would know. The early October rain softened the soil after the summer heat and allowed ploughing to take place, then the later rain in the spring led up to the ripening of the crop. Once the seed is sown no farmer in his senses would interfere with it. He waits patiently for the inherent power of the seed to bring its fruit. He looks to God not only for the rain but also for the sun. The harvest, natural and spiritual, is really out of human hands. Be patient, specially in the realm of the preaching of the Gospel

[Back to Top](#)

5:7-8

James is seeking to encourage the battling believers to look to God and so to be strengthened in heart and in hope. We likewise must do this, remembering that we must always look beyond any one season of sowing and reaping, because the coming of the Lord is at hand. This gives not only a sense of urgency (which may not be James' intention here) but also a great sense of assurance. World experience is not just trundling along aimlessly but moving inexorably forward to a fixed point when the Lord Jesus Christ will return in His glory. That will be a day of judgment as well as a day of salvation. Some will mourn (Rev. 1:7) and some will rejoice and be glad (Isa. 25:9). We must never lose sight of this fact of the coming of the Lord because it enshrines the fact of final victory. Think of Paul's words in 1 Cor. 15:51-58 and how he applies them to encourage believers to go on in faithful obedience because their labour is not in vain. Confidence in God and assurance about the outcome enable us to cope with provocation, disappointment, frustration, opposition and all the hideous moral and social wrong that surround us. Where we can, we must work to change the evils of society and to ease the hurts of men and women who are baffled and bruised by experience. But at the same time, we must recognise that some of the things society has to live with are not just the consequences of human choice but also elements in God's judgment. Never think that all judgment is postponed to the end of history. If God delays His judgments it is due to His longsuffering and His desire to bring people to repentance and salvation (2 Pet. 3:8-10). But the Day of Judgment will come.

[Back to Top](#)

5:9

The only way to cope with and to continue in the life of faith when circumstances are grim and costly is to hold firm to facts. The assured facts that James highlights are the certainty of the harvest (7), the coming of the Lord to vindicate His people (8) and to judge all that is evil (9). These are things we can be sure of no matter what our immediate experience may be, and in this way we make God our refuge and strength (Ps. 46:1-2). We are sure He is in fact working to plan (Acts 18:9-10; 23:11) and as that plan develops, there is nothing that has the power to separate us from God's love (Rom. 8:35-38). This is why James urges us not to grumble. He knows that when difficult circumstances go on a long time it is easy to become bitter, to compare ourselves with others and to blame others, whether they are Christians or non-Christians. We seldom start by thinking that we

ourselves may be the cause of some of our difficulties, either through something we have said and done or failed to say or do. Sometimes we are quite innocent and people hate us without a cause, as they hated Jesus. What we have to do is to remember that God is the judge of all and there is no respect of persons with Him. He does not take a lenient view of wrongdoing just because the person is a Christian. Indeed there is less excuse for Christians doing wrong than for non-Christians. The Christian has light and truth and grace, whereas the unbeliever is in darkness. When the Christian "judges" he is setting a high standard by which he himself will be judged. Better leave it to God who always knows the rights and wrongs. Consider David's submission and refusal to judge in 2 Sam. 16:5-14.

[Back to Top](#)

5:10-11

Before considering the reference to the prophets note how the climax of these two verses is an affirmation of the doctrine of God. He has a clear purpose and in all His outworking of His will He is compassionate and merciful. Now, it is only as we take our stand on the doctrine of God and accept what is revealed of His nature, that we are able to cope with the perplexities and demands of daily experience. Faith accepts that God is, and that He rewards those who diligently seek after Him (Heb. 11:6). Faith also accepts that God's ways, His methods, are higher than ours (Isa.55:8-11). His ways are superior, more far-reaching and more sure than ours and therefore we must not jump to conclusions about the meaning and significance of what is happening to us. James will soon refer to Job, whose disastrous experiences caused his friends to misinterpret the situation and to conclude that he was a backslider under the rebuke of God and in danger of rejection. They could not have been more wrong. The explanation of our hard and difficult circumstances may be in terms of personal sanctification (Heb. 12:5-11); spiritual service (Col.1:24) and usefulness to God (2 Cor. 12:7-10); or in terms of future generations and the development of God's work after we are dead and gone (1 Pet. 1:10-12). At times for example, at the Cross it seemed that God's work had been overcome and frustrated. But it is not so. In the Acts of the Apostles, at a time of revival, it seemed a tragedy that there should be a wave of persecution. But it was not so, for the persecution which scattered the Christians led to the first great wave of missionary outreach. We begin to see the need for patience. Waiting on God often means waiting to see what God will do next.

[Back to Top](#)

5:10-11

James directs our thoughts to the prophets as an example of suffering, hardship, patience and endurance. He may be recalling the words Jesus spoke to encourage His disciples and to keep them from being shaken when persecution started (John 15:18-16:1). Peter also learned well from these words of Jesus as 1 Pet. 4: 12-14; 5:6-10 make plain. James here mentions by name only Job, whom we do not normally regard as being a prophet but whose words reveal glorious truth about God. We will think about Job tomorrow but since James makes a sweeping reference to the prophets we should read for today and tomorrow the glorious catalogue of the men and women of faith in Heb. 11, especially the closing section (Heb. 11:32-40). These people who went through such costly travail, who were so often criticised and devalued by their own generation, and who made some terrible mistakes in their lives, were the people who, under God, carried the work of redemption forward through the generations of history. Yes, they suffered, but they kept going on because they believed God, and were persuaded that He was good and nothing but good to His people (Ps. 73:1), faithful in His covenant love, and keeping their going out and coming in (Ps. 121:1-8). That is more than enough to think about for one day.

[Back to Top](#)

5:10-11

There is a particular blessedness and deep happiness for those who endure. James addresses himself to those who had had long experience of sitting under the reading and teaching of the Word of God. That is the significance of the phrase "You have heard"; cf. Matt. 5:21, 27, 33 etc. James is reminding Christians who are beginning to be shaken and to lose ground in the face of difficulties, of those who, by faith, coped and triumphed. At first sight we do not think of Job's steadfastness but rather of his shattering experiences that caused him to say many bitter things. But if we read the story more carefully it is not Job's extravagant statements that impress but rather his deep and abiding trust in God in the darkness and perplexity that

enveloped him and his family. It is clear from the first two chapters of Job that God is to be seen as totally sovereign in all suffering. He permits, ordains, limits and controls it all and, in the lives of those He chooses and calls, God demonstrates the victory of His grace. Job's life became the arena in which the Devil was thoroughly defeated, not by divine intervention, but by the patient endurance of faith in a man's life. Even when things were at their worst and when his "comforters" were at their most pious and most insensitive worst, Job clung to his belief that God was good. In the end Job was richer and more blessed than at the beginning. Read Job 23 and then think of Jesus' words about how fruitful vines are pruned in order that they might be even more fruitful (John 15:1-2). The Lord is compassionate, full of pity and rich in mercy and the whole Bible testifies that this is so. Be persuaded about this and it will be a great rock and refuge in every experience of life.

[Back to Top](#)

5:12

The matter of swearing or taking oaths seems to emerge from the reference to Job's story in which, at one intense point, the man's wife, feeling the strain and distressed by her husband's seemingly unnecessary and unjustified suffering, urged him to curse God and die (Job 2:9). In this the wife was the unwitting tool of Satan who had earlier taunted God to the effect that Job would do this if things went badly with him (Job 1:11). In the event, Job answered with the quietness of faith (1:20-21; 2:10). The point of James' exhortation and warning here seems to be in relation to giving way to excessively passionate and spiritual speech when under pressure. There is a time to say, "God is my witness" or "God knows" (Rom. 1:9; Deut. 4:26) but these are solemn well-considered occasions, invested with considerable spiritual significance. What James refers to is simply heated reaction and false spirituality which is not faith, even though it may seem to be so. Think of Peter's presumption when he challenged Jesus to make him walk on the water (Matt. 14:22ff). Think of how some Christians use the text, "I can do all things ..." (Phil. 4:13) to justify ill-considered action. Speech, as James has said earlier in this epistle, is difficult and dangerous to handle and very revealing. We must not cover up our genuine human feelings by using "holy" words. We must say what we mean and mean what we say. Exaggeration is lying. Innuendo is deceitful. Over-calculation in speech is simply dishonesty. When people ask us how we are, we should give a brief honest answer. If we give a pious answer and they do the same in return it simply means two people are not being honest with each other or with God. There is a better way as we shall see in the next verse. But first consider Jesus' words in Matt. 5:33-37; 12:36-37.

[Back to Top](#)

5:13

James is seeking to help believers to cope with the strains and pressures of life in an alien and difficult world. There are many perplexities to be faced and we must take our stand on the doctrine of God, persuaded of the sovereignty of God, the superiority of His methods and the sureness of His working. Instead of reacting emotionally, either by outburst of speech or by silent resentment (12) we must go to God in prayer. If we relate every happening of life to God we will keep our souls from bitterness, our minds from confusion, our emotions from distortion and our lives from distraction. Remember that the Devil is always at work to take us away from God and to minimise our spiritual service. Now, says James, if any one among you is suffering, let him pray. Note the words "among you" (RSV) because they indicate the company and fellowship of believers. There is a time to pray alone, and when we are sorely hurt the natural thing is to withdraw, to hide our hurt, because we are not sure how to handle it. But more often when we suffer we need to share it at once with others, to pray with others and to tell others just how much we need their prayers. Sometimes there are no others available. Sometimes our own attitudes and our failure to cultivate friendship and fellowship lead to a degree of isolation. Sometimes, as was the case with Jesus in Gethsemane, when we have asked our closest friends to share with us the agony of a situation, they fail us. But in the story of Gethsemane, even when Jesus found His friends asleep, He did not criticise them, nor did He turn aside from the way of obedience. He continued to pray (Matt. 26:36-46). Whatever happens to us, if it sends us to God in prayer, then it is a blessing.

[Back to Top](#)

5:13

Keep in mind the suffering that lay at the heart of the story of the coming of the Saviour. Within a short time of the birth of the Saviour the family were fleeing for their lives, with the horror of Herod's slaughter of the children overshadowing them. The holy family were exiles, refugees in a foreign land (Matt.. 2:13-15) and it could not have been easy. They suffered, and we can imagine how they prayed, waiting upon God and committing their lives to Him. Imagine how Mary must have wondered just how all the promises of God concerning her child could possibly be fulfilled when it seemed that everything had gone so radically wrong right from the start. Take it to God in prayer. That is the advice of James. It does not mean we are to storm the throne of grace, even though we come boldly (Heb. 4:16). We do not demand or claim an immediate answer or even an explanation, although these attitudes may be right at certain times. We simply bring our whole situation to God in an attitude of trust, acknowledging that there are factors, developments, explanations and purposes which are simply not visible to us. We may say to God, "Why?" just as Jesus did on the Cross. That is not necessarily an expression of unbelief. It may be a necessary expression of costly uncertainty as we tread the way of obedience. It is very different from the spirit that says in complaint and resentment, "Why should this happen to me?" In the story of the Transfiguration (Lk. 9:28-36), when the human situation was going to go from bad to worse, the eternal realities were made plain. Is life hard? It may be the most significant stage of fruitful service you have ever been in.

[Back to Top](#)

5:13

During the last war the radio programme, "Let the people sing", was a powerful psychological boost helping a beleaguered people to cope and to go on. James is very wise and a marvellous pastor. He tells his people to go to God as much when they are happy as when they are hard pressed. This is important because it is so easy to allow happiness, blessing and human fulfilment to capture the heart and fascinate the spirit so that we forget God. But it need not be so, if we remember to relate all our good fortune to God so that we express our gratitude to God and also to the human instruments by whom God has brought His blessing to us. Praise and thanksgiving are essential elements in a believer's personal life and prayer life (Phil. 4:4-7) and the praises of God's people gathered together are of the essence of worship. God is exalted in and enthroned on the praises of His people (Ps. 22:3). The old translation says that God inhabits the praises of His people, and congregational praise is a true means of grace and a living participation in the service of God. We pour out our hearts to God (Ps. 62:8). It is part of our witness individually and corporately (Ps. 126:1-3). Praise is of the essence of Christian life, worship and service (Eph. 5:19-20; Col. 3:15-17). Read Rom. 15:4-13 and see how Paul ends his great exposition and application of the Gospel by reminding the believers just how much there is to praise God for. We are summoned to praise God (Ps. 103; 105:1-5; 107:1-3) and in doing so we glorify God (Ps. 50:23). When our praises are truly Spirit-inspired our theme will be that of 1 Pet. 1:3-9 and Eph. 1:3-8, marvelling at what God has done. We will never cease to praise Him.

[Back to Top](#)

5:14-15

These verses are the focus of much misunderstanding, and wrong use of them has led to so much distress that we take time to study them in detail. We are dealing here with the life of the church, with believers who manifestly belonged to a specific company or congregation of the church, which congregation had elders exercising spiritual oversight and taking responsibility for pastoral care and sick visiting. The initiative lay with the sick person, and the action with the company of the elders gathered, apparently in the home of the sick person. The anointing with oil was a customary thing in these days and must not here be invested with too much significance. The actual anointing could have been similar to the breaking of the box of spikenard (Mk. 14:3; John 12:3) or, as some do now, by making the sign of the cross with the thumb on the sick person's forehead. Neither is specified and we must not assume that one particular custom is right. Nor must we think this verse gives any warrant for the practice of "Extreme Unction" which, it is claimed, is performed to see the person safely through death, whereas James is speaking of someone being restored to health and strength. No one is in a position to say exactly what James meant by "the prayer of faith" for all prayer should be on the

basis of faith. Nor can we be certain if he is referring to the faith of the elders, the faith of the sick person, or the faith of the whole church. All these uncertainties should prevent us from building a whole doctrine of "healing" on these two verses. Nor can we read into the verses anything regarding "the gift" of healing. But we still hold to the fact of miracle.

[Back to Top](#)

5:14-15

James is dealing with the practical problems of life. There are two positions both held on biblical grounds, with regard to miraculous healing and the gifts of the Spirit. Some say that all the gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:4-11) are a normal and necessary part of the life of the church and that a church not exercising the gifts of the Spirit is not a truly biblical and spiritual church. They insist that the "gifts" should be sought, expected and used. Others (and this applies by and large, to the mainstream historical church) emphasise that the miraculous gifts of the Spirit belonged to the apostolic age of the church and were withdrawn as being no longer necessary "signs" and "authentications" at the end of that age. Both "camps" have produced rather unattractive Christians when attitudes have been extreme. This is not the place to make pronouncements and we make but two observations. God, being God, reserves the right to act when and how He wills, but it does not follow that because God acts in a certain situation in a certain way that He must always do so. Secondly, we must be quite clear that all manifestations of power and miracle are not necessarily from God, even when the results are good and beneficial. There have been T.V. programmes on the subject of "Faith healing" or "spirit healing" in which practitioners with verifiable results (as far as that is ever possible) have not related their results in any way to the Christian God. Some who have been "cured" have spoken of "mind over matter" and of "healing that is within" and we cannot deny the "results". This raises the whole question of alternative medicine and the capacity of the human body to heal itself. We must see that the question of sickness and health is not necessarily a Christian issue. Read the miracle in John 9:1-11, note Jesus' method, and keep it in mind until tomorrow.

[Back to Top](#)

5:14-15

Read now the miracles in Mk. 8:22-26 and Mk. 10:46-52. Note how differently Jesus acted and think of what would have happened if the three healed men had come together to compare their experiences. Mud and spittle were used, not oil. One healing involved washing, one had the laying on of hands, one was instantaneous and one man's sight came back in stages. We are told in Acts of Peter's shadow and Paul's sweat rags apparently resulting in miracles (Acts 5:15; 19:12). Once we have even heard of an excited rugby fan claiming to have been healed of shingles by kissing a player's boot after a great Welsh victory. We may laugh, but we are in no position to deny the claim. What we must see is the disaster, and division that would follow if each person insisted that his experience was *the* way that the Spirit of God worked miracle. Can we then *insist* that what James speaks of here is the only and the necessary way of handling a situation of sickness? If we turn to the story in Isa. 38:1-8, 21 we see a fascinating instance of the bringing together of divine intervention and the standard medical practice of the time. Part of the miracle of God's providence is the providing for mankind of the marvels of medical science. But the "gift" of scientific discovery, as we well know, can be used for evil purposes when it is divorced from faith and submission to God. In the matter of sickness and healing we must keep from extremes. We have no right to discount medical means and to concentrate on the laying on of hands. Nor dare we stop praying and put our trust in pills. Think well of this.

[Back to Top](#)

5:14-15

We referred yesterday to the healing of King Hezekiah and how his life was extended for fifteen years. It was a miracle; but was it all benefit in the long run? During these fifteen years a son was born to Hezekiah and that son, Manasseh, became the evil scourge of the whole nation when he became king. It was part of God's plan to heal Hezekiah but the purpose behind it remains, in measure, a mystery. But then there are many mysteries in the realm of sickness, health and suffering, quite apart from the fact that all miracles of healing are essentially temporary because we must all die in due time. Paul pleaded with God to relieve him of the terrible "thorn in

the flesh", whatever it was. But God said he had to live with it in order to be more fully the fruitful servant of God (2 Cor. 12:1-10). The young minister Timothy, trained by Paul to be his successor, was plagued by continuing poor health and by a timorous personality, both of which ailments seemed to be hindrances to his calling (1 Tim. 4:12; 5:23). There is no sign of Paul, a man filled with the Spirit, seeking to heal Timothy. Indeed, he counselled a particular kind of medicine for his stomach and gave some verbal therapy for his tendency to fear and depression (2 Tim. 1:6, 7). Without doubt Paul prayed for Timothy and also for his fellow missionary Trophimus, who had to be left behind because of illness (2 Tim. 4:20). How we need to learn to pray, and to pray in faith, bringing the needy ones into the presence of the Lord and trusting the Lord for His good and perfect will. How we need to see from Scripture and from the lives of suffering saints that, "Out of the presses of pain, comes the soul's best wine."

[Back to Top](#)

5:14-15

We continue our survey of this vexed issue by highlighting certain dangers. We must not allow our emotions to run away with us. What exactly are we talking about when we speak of sickness and healing? It is false to say that sickness is never God's will. People quote Ps. 103:3 and Isa. 53:5 and speak of how God grants long life to faith and obedience. But Jesus died in his thirties and godly men such as Murray McCheyne died even earlier. It is sinful cruelty to suggest to people that their sicknesses are the result of being out of God's will. It can sometimes be so, as 1 Cor. 11:28-32 indicates, but it is most certainly not always so. It is also desperately cruel to say to battling people that if they are not healed it is just lack of faith. It is even worse to say to the sick that their unresolved problem is demon possession. We believe in the Devil and in demons but we do not make that the first diagnosis of every situation. James certainly makes some real connection between sickness and sin because he speaks of forgiveness. We are reminded of the case of the paralysed man in John 5:1-14, where Jesus seems to make plain to the man that his sin had been the cause of his paralysis. But then in John 9:1-3 Jesus radically contradicts the commonly held notion that every sickness is the direct result of sin. Is any among you sick? Come to God. Wait upon God. Look to God. But remember, what God *can* do and what He *actually does* are different, and His ways are often past finding out. But His ways are always higher, better and surer than ours. On that basis, we pray the prayer of faith.

[Back to Top](#)

5:14-15

We conclude this long, and we hope helpful, consideration by reminding ourselves that sometimes God heals and sometimes He does not. The "sentence of death" has been passed on this world in which we live, but there are miracles of grace for which we have no explanation. There are healings which are the work of God, whether they are by direct, divine action or by medical means, or by the health-giving therapy that operates in a fellowship where the Word of God and prayer are central. There are deep-seated personality disorders and there are tangled and complicated lives sorted out and healed in the course of on-going ministry without any "astonishing" manifestations or any special processes. It is always right to pray for healing if it be God's will, and we do not need to be able, as in James' situation, to go physically to the sick person. We go in prayer to the Throne of Grace and from there God exercises His wise and perfect will. It is clear from James' words that he expects the company of believers to be a caring and sharing fellowship, all one in Christ Jesus, a fellowship in which health and healing, forgiveness and restoration can be found. Sometimes hurts need more healing than sickness. But we must recognise that there are issues which far outweigh the healing of bodies. Paul spoke of our outward nature wasting away (2 Cor. 4:7-12, 16-18) as a result of battles and struggles, weakness and fear. But in and through it all, eternal things were being accomplished. How we need to look to eternal day when there will be no more sickness, pain or sorrow, for all that will have passed away (Isa. 35:10; Rev. 7:13-17; 21:1-4).

[Back to Top](#)

5:16

The previous verses lead on very naturally to the thought of the fellowship at prayer and the caring and sharing that must be part of the life of the church. But note carefully that James speaks about confessing sins, not just

talking about them, and he makes plain that the confessing is to one another. It is not a case of one person always doing the listening. Those who have been greatly helped by someone's kind and caring listening, and who have thereby been led back to God, should certainly be the kind of people who minister to others, especially to the friend who was such a help. There are few things sorrier than being forgotten by those you have helped. Fellowship involves honesty, but it must be the right kind of honesty. There is no call to tell everyone everything, and there is a talking about sins and failures that is wrong and leads to preoccupation with sin and at times leads the "listener" into temptation. On the other hand, the Devil is quick to trap us into a wrong kind of secrecy in which we become persuaded we are the only Christian who would ever sin the sins we have sinned.

It can be a tremendous relief to confess our sin to a trusted friend who, walking with God, knows how to minister and help. This is all very practical and we must think clearly. To confess is not primarily sorrow for sin, and certainly not sorrow (self-pity) that we have been found out. To confess is to say the same thing about sin as God says. It is to recognise the wrongness and inexcusable nature of what we have done. It is a case of being honest with God and with others. Do not forget the others. We seldom sin in isolation. We create problems at times for those we love the most. Read Hebrews 12:12-15 Bitterness spreads.

[Back to Top](#)

5:16

Pray for one another. Share with one another and see what rich, sweet and health-giving fellowship is the result. It is a case of rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep (Rom. 12:15). That calls for a sensitivity towards people, so that as far as possible we will not say or do things that will hurt and hinder them. We should make it our business to befriend them in a way that will help and encourage without exposing their weakness and hurt. Read Gal. 6:1-2, 6, 9-10, and note the emphasis on gentleness. Some are too fond of probing into people's hurts. Some are too brash in their plain speaking. There is a time to be blunt, as Jesus was with the woman of Samaria (John 4:16-18) but we must be very sure of our motives. When we are told of burdens and failures we can be too quick to say, "That's nothing to worry about." Perhaps that is true, but it was a big worry to the distressed brother or sister who plucked up courage to speak and to confess. Some have been entrusted with confidences and have spoken about them to others, and this is utterly dishonourable. Some have confessed dark secrets and then began to realise that their "friend" despised them. How different from Jesus, the Friend of Sinners! He would never break a bruised reed or smother the flickering flame that is struggling to establish itself (Isa. 42:3).

"There is no place where earth's sorrows
Are more felt than up in heaven:
There is no place where earth's failings
Have such kindly judgment given." (Faber)

Walk in fellowship with Jesus who knows and understands all the feelings and failures (Heb. 2:17-18; 4:13-16).

[Back to Top](#)

5:16

Note how great an emphasis this practical Christian teacher places on prayer. From v.13ff we have the mingling of prayer in personal life and prayer in the fellowship. Some things are best prayed for in private and other things can be brought to the prayer meeting. It is a good sign spiritually when we are open enough to ask for prayer. There are some Christians who refuse to open up to anyone, perhaps because they are afraid they may appear weak and not very spiritual. That is foolish. Think of how often Paul opened his heart to his friends, how appreciative he was of care shown to him by Luke the beloved Physician and others (Col. 4:14; Phil. 4:10; Rom. 16:1-4). From his heart he asked again and again that people should pray for him (1 Thess. 5:25). There are times when we just do not know what to do or to say to help someone in need. That is the time to go to God in prayer and to bear that needy person on your heart before the throne of grace. And if we are ever at the stage when we are at our wits' end, not knowing what to do and afraid to go to anyone, then go to God. Go right to God. Do not hesitate. Your heavenly Father knows your need, and He may well send an angel to minister to you. The angel may be a human one who will put an arm round your shoulder and you will begin to know the healing of the hurt and the easing of the inward tension, so that you begin to live again. There is an old hymn that speaks of the sympathising Jesus. Do you know Him?

[Back to Top](#)

5:17-18

James selects only one incident from the life and ministry of Elijah (1 Kings 17:1; 18:41ff) and he introduces it by the statement at the end of v.16, which is a glorious affirmation as to the power of prayer. Prayer accomplishes mighty things. The effect is objective, in the real world, and not just in our own personal devotional lives. But James says that it is the prayer of a righteous man or woman that gets things done. Does that disqualify all of us? We have no righteousness of our own, but we have a. perfect righteousness in Christ. Think of Wesley's words: "Clothed in righteousness divine, Bold I approach the eternal throne ...". We must not allow anything to hold us back from the place of prayer, which is the throne of grace, or from expressing our prayers, whether in private or in the fellowship. There is a tremendous encouragement to pray. But at the same time we must be right in our lives, The Psalmist says that if we regard or cherish or trifle with sin the Lord will not hear us (Ps. 66:16-18). Some suggest these verses mean that if we allow sin to hold sway in our lives the Lord *cannot* hear us. It is as if the noise of our sins drowns out the petitions of our voices. In 1 Pet. 3:7 we are told that wrong attitudes and relationships can hinder our prayers. In Isa. 1:15-17 we are faced with God refusing to listen to the prayers of His people because they had dealt wrongly with Him on a spiritual level and wrongly with their fellows on a human level. We have the same theme in Micah 3:4 and a stark statement of it in Zech. 7:12, 13. Prayer has all to do with the life of the pray-er.

[Back to Top](#)

5:17-18

We think of Elijah as a mighty man of God, a prophet of fire, and as a man strong enough to stand for God totally alone. But James knew his Old Testament and reminds us that Elijah was a man just like ourselves, totally human, subject to great waves of emotion, and at times so disappointed with himself and his work that he became depressive, suicidal, and quite distorted in his thinking about God. But he was a man of prevailing prayer. James says he prayed fervently, but on Mount Carmel he was astonishingly quiet, composed, non-extravagant and quite unemotional compared with the dervish-like antics of the priests of Baal. We must not confuse excitement and noise with earnestness and spirituality. Elijah "prayed in his prayer" and that is very different from the Pharisee who prayed with himself (Luke 18:9-14). Elijah was in earnest and was dealing with God. We are not told about his prayer before the drought, but his announcement to Ahab spoke of standing before the Lord. On Mount Carmel again Elijah was in the presence of God. He repaired the broken-down altar and then he presented his prayer which had at its heart a testimony that in all his activity he had been walking in obedience to God. There was nothing to hinder his prayers and there was no need for special preparation for a crisis. Elijah was like Daniel. His life was open to God. That was how he lived. Little wonder these men's prayers were answered. Read 1 Kings 18:36-37 and Daniel 6:10. Lord, teach us to pray.

[Back to Top](#)

5:17-18

We have here a plain statement regarding the effect of prayer on the course of nature and its effect on the economic life of a whole nation. Of course, the ultimate explanation of events is not found in the prayer of the prophet but in the will of God. In 1 Kings 17:1 nothing is said about prayer, only an affirmation of God's command. Was Elijah's action in praying for drought lacking in humanity? Of course not. He knew that God stood by His own law as expressed in Deut. 11:13-17, and without doubt the Spirit of God prompted and inspired Elijah, the servant of God, cf. Rom. 8:26-27; 2 Sam. 7:25-29. We must learn to see our prayer life as being vitally incorporated into the on-going work of a sovereign God. Our prayers are not irrelevant, but neither are they greater than God. Was it John Calvin who said that the prayers of the saints are the decrees of God beginning to work? Remember that Elijah's prayers were largely out of the public eye, which is where they should be (Matt. 6:1, 5-8), apart from when the church gathers for prayer. Remember also that Elijah had to live with the answer to and the outworking of his own prayers. For all of three years he was a silent prophet, not even able to pray for the easing of the nation's crisis because there was no indication that the nation was listening to or learning from God. Elijah prayed on and on, keeping his eyes and his heart fixed on God. But remember last of all that prayer that prevails is not the province of spiritual giants alone. Elijah was a man just

like us, but he lived his life in obedient submission to God. That is how we learn faith. That is when we learn to pray.

[Back to Top](#)

5:19-20

James is practical right to the end and in facing the fact that believers do backslide he raises a variety of profound questions. He speaks of some within the fellowship who wander and err, sometimes being led astray away from the truth, possibly by some discontented and disaffected Christian. Some err and stray because of ignorance of the doctrines of the Gospel or because of a false spirituality that thinks they are going on a superior way. Why that should happen while sitting under a biblical ministry is a mystery, unless the Word is simply not being received in faith (Heb. 4:2; Gal. 1:6; 3:1; 5:7-8). Some say they err and go back from God because of increasing pressure, opposition and temptation. But in the light of 1 Cor 10:13 there is no need to fall, because God has promised the way of escape. There are both warnings and encouragements in Scripture regarding backsliding: Heb. 10:23-39 is one such passage, and it is to be handled carefully. Some go back from Christ in such a radical way that the reality of their conversion is to be seriously doubted. We must be careful about pronouncing judgment. That is God's business. But consider John 6:66; 2 Tim. 4:10. Where do such people stand spiritually? James does not discuss that subject. His emphasis is on the possibility of the backslider being restored and he looks for someone in the fellowship to be ready, able and willing to go and look for the lost sheep to bring it back. No doubt he was thinking of Jesus' story in Lk. 15:3-7 and of the marvellous words in Hos. 14:4ff. We should be glad indeed that we have a God who heals our backsliding and loves us freely.

[Back to Top](#)

5:19-20

There are many ways by which we can stray, sin and turn away from God and so imperil our souls. But the only way back is the way of true repentance, which involves not only an honest and radical acknowledgment of our sin, but an equally radical turning away from the sin and from the way of life and associations that led to it. It is along that route that we must seek to help people, and realism in this area is not in any sense a denial of the gentleness and kindness of Jesus. Remember that James is speaking of this in the context of prayer and that is the starting point if we would lead anyone to Christ. To bring back the wanderer may take a long time and much heartache in prayer and waiting, as the story of the Prodigal Son tells (Lk. 15:11ff). Sometimes the wanderer, like a lost sheep, can be picked up and carried back to where he or she belongs. A lost sheep may struggle because it is frightened, but when back with its own, in the care of the shepherd, it will be at peace. James speaks of saving a soul from death. If the backslider is a believer there is no eternal condemnation (Rom. 8:1), but his condition is serious indeed. We must be in earnest (Heb. 2:1-3). The last word of this very practical Christian teacher shows how much he had of the Spirit of Jesus. He speaks not only of a multitude of sins being forgiven but of them being covered up (1 Pet. 4:8). Think of how grieved and angry Jesus was with those who made a public spectacle of a woman's sin and shame (John 8:1-11). What a relief it is to realise that, being forgiven and restored, the past with all its failures and wrongs need never again be mentioned. But the restored one will be everlastingly grateful for the assurance that the blood of Jesus Christ *keeps on* cleansing us from sin (1 John 1:7-9). What a Gospel. What a Saviour. How much we should be willing to serve others in His Name!

[Back to Top](#)