James - Commentaries by Stanley Bruce Anstey

The Epistle Of James: The Reality Of Faith Proved In the Circumstances Of Everyday Life, James 1:1-18: Faith Proved by How We Handle Trials

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The Salutation

Vs. 1—“James” writes to his fellow countrymen who had professed faith in "the Lord Jesus Christ." He was not one of the twelve apostles (Luke 6:13-16), but was one of the chief elders in the assembly at Jerusalem (Acts 12:17; 15:13-21; 21:17-25; Gal. 2:9). James was "the Lord’s brother," having grown up in the family of Joseph and Mary (Mark 6:3; Gal. 1:19). He was an unbeliever during the Lord’s earthly ministry (John 7:3-10), but was converted shortly after His death. This likely happened when the Lord appeared to him after He rose from the dead (1 Cor. 15:7). Josephus tells us that James was stoned to death by the Sanhedrin (the Jewish council) around A.D. 61-62 in the same fashion as Stephen.

This epistle is classed as a "general" epistle, meaning that it was not written to any specific assembly or individual, but to a wider audience—"to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad" (chap. 1:1). These tribes of Israel had been dispersed for many years, starting with the carrying away of the ten tribes (2 Kings 15:27-31; 17:3-41) and then later the two tribes (2 Kings 24). While a remnant of Jews (the two tribes) returned to their homeland in Ezra 1-2, most remained scattered (John 7:35). James' faith was such that he believed that there were some among these tribes of Israel who had faith in Christ, and addressed his epistle to them. Some of these may have been in Jerusalem and heard the apostles preach at Pentecost (Acts 2), or at some later date, and returned to the various countries where they lived as believers on the Lord Jesus. J. N. Darby points out that by James speaking of "the twelve tribes" in this way, it indicated that the nation had not yet been formally (literally) set aside in the ways of God. This happened later in A.D. 70.

Two Kinds of Temptations (Trials)

Since the brethren to whom James was writing were facing a severe trial of persecution in regard to the Christian stand that they had taken, he addresses the subject of temptations (trials) first. He speaks of two kinds of trials that a believer faces in the path of faith. They are:

Holy trials—These are temptations from without; from external things that God allows to come into our lives to test us (vss. 2-12).

Unholy trials—These are temptations from within that emanate from us allowing the lusts of our sin-nature to gain control of us (vss. 13-15).

(Hebrews 4:15 tells us that the Lord Jesus was tested in all points as we are in the area of the first class of temptations. It says that He was “tempted in all things in like manner, sin apart.” This means that He was tested by trials in His life of every kind that a holy man could be tried, with the exception of temptations that emanate from the “sin” nature within. The Lord never had temptations of the second kind, because He did not have a fallen sin-nature with which to respond to Satan's temptations. John 14:30 indicates that there was nothing "in" Him that could be affected by such things because He had only a holy human nature – Luke 1:35.)

In these verses, James shows that both kinds of temptations are to be met with faith. Not only would faith help a person to rise above them victoriously, but it would also manifest the reality of their profession.

Temptations From Without

Vss. 2-4—The Church, in that day, was predominantly comprised of converted Jews, and they were under tremendous persecution from their unbelieving countrymen for their profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 2:14-16). How this mixed company of professed converts reacted to these trials from without (persecutions) revealed a lot about where they truly were in their souls—that is, whether they were real believers or not. There was a constant temptation before them to avoid the trial of persecution by drawing back into the Jewish fold (Heb. 10:38-39). However, that would prove that their professed faith in Christ was not real.

While persecution was the outstanding trial that these Jewish converts faced, James addresses his remarks to a wide variety of trials which he calls, "divers [various] temptations." This, of course, would include the trial of persecution, but would take in all sorts of things that would test a Christian's faith. It could be health-related things, financial difficulties, family sorrows, marital problems, etc.

James says that we "fall into" these temptations (holy trials). This may sound a little unusual; we could better understand it if he had said this in connection with the second kind of trials relating to sin (vss. 13-18). However, we must remember that the KJV is an old English translation that has some archaic usages of words. The expression "fall into" in this passage is an example. Today we would say "befall." This helps us to understanding what James is talking about. He is saying that there will be certain difficulties and troubles that will befall us, and thus come into our lives quite unexpectedly and beyond our control (compare Acts 27:41).

Four Things Necessary in Order to Profit From Trials

James speaks of four things that we must have in times of trial in order to profit from it spiritually.

A Cheerful Spirit

Firstly, we need to maintain a cheerful spirit (vs. 2). He says, "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations." This might appear a little paradoxical. How can anybody be happy about having a trial in his or her life? However, James doesn't say that we are to be happy about the troubles and problems that come our way. God does not want us to laugh off a trial of this sort, as if it were something that is not to be taken seriously. James is simply warning us against the tendency to complain when a trial comes our way. Thus, his exhortation is to

be careful to maintain a cheerful spirit. The "joy" that he is speaking about here results from faith looking beyond the trial to its positive outcome. If we lack faith, we will not rejoice but complain about it. Consequently, we will not be in a proper state to gain from the trial.

An Understanding Mind

James goes on to speak of a second thing that we need in order to profit from trials—an understanding mind (vs. 3). He says, "Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience [endurance]." Our ability to rejoice in trials is connected with "knowing" and believing that the Lord wouldn't allow anything to touch us that didn't have a purpose of "love" on His part (Heb. 12:6) and "need be" on our part (1 Peter 1:6). Understanding that the trial has been ordered of God and to work out something in us for our spiritual profit—such as "patience [endurance]" which is an important feature in Christian character—we will be able to pass through the trial with the right attitude. Without this knowledge, we might not know what was happening when trouble assailed us, and as a result, our faith could break down under it and we could become discouraged.

The Apostle Paul speaks of the importance of this kind of knowledge in Romans 8:28: "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose." He doesn't say that all things that come into our lives are good—because some of them may be very sad and bad—but that those things "work together for good." We may not see it at the time of the trial, but the trial is meant to work in our lives toward something that is good in the end—as far as our moral being is concerned (Deut. 8:16). Let us remember that every child of God is in the school of God, and thus under His divine training (Job 35:10-11; 36:22; Psa. 94:10; Isa. 48:17; Heb. 12:10-11). God uses trials for our spiritual education—to teach us dependence and obedience (Psa. 119:67-68, 71) and to form the character of Christ in us (Rom. 8:29), etc. Knowing and believing that such things "work together for" our good and profit gives us the ability to endure in times of trial.

J. N. Darby remarked that "trial cannot in itself confer grace, but under God’s hand it can break the will and detect hidden and unsuspected evils, and that if judged, the new life is more fully developed and God has a larger place in the heart. Also, by it lowly dependence is taught; and as a result, there is more distrust of self and the flesh, and a consciousness that the world is nothing, and what is eternally true and divine has a larger place in the soul." Hence, trials have a way of removing superfluous things in our lives and in our personalities. They tend to disconnect us from our material resources and positions in life, and connect us with what is spiritual and eternal.

When trial comes, we quite naturally think, "How can I get out of this." But we really should be saying is, "What can I get out of this!" There are at least ten positive things that result from the trials that the Lord's people pass through, if they are taken rightly:

They are opportunities for God to show His power and grace to sustain His people in times of trouble, and thus manifest His glory (Job 37:7; John 9:3; 11:4).

Through them we are brought to know the love of God in a deeper way, and thus we are drawn closer to the Lord (Rom. 5:3-5).

Through them we are conformed morally to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:28-29), and thus they work toward our moral perfection (James 1:4).

If we are walking in paths of unrighteousness, they are used by God to correct our spirits and our ways, and thus produce in us the peaceable fruit of righteousness (Heb. 12:5-11).

Through them our faith is strengthened (2 Thess. 1:3-4).

They teach us dependence (Psa. 119:67-68, 71).

They wean us from earthly things and thus turn us heavenward; as a result, the heavenly hope burns more brightly in our hearts (Luke 12:22-40).

They draw brethren closer to one another (Job 2:11; 6:14; 1 Chron. 7:21-22).

The lessons we learn by going through trials enable us to sympathize with others more effectively (2 Cor. 1:3-4).

They capacitate us for the theme of praise in the coming glory (2 Cor. 4:15-17).

A Submissive Will

James speaks of a third thing that we need in order to profit from trials—a submissive will that accepts the trial from hand of God as a divine appointment (vs. 4). James says, "Let patience [endurance] have her perfect work that ye may be perfect." The danger here is to resist what God is doing in our lives through the trial, and thus not to profit from it. The key is to "let" the trial do its good work in us, because it is ordered of God to make us "perfect." Perfect, in the sense that James speaks of it here, means full growth (maturity). This shows that God is deeply interested in our spiritual development, and that He is willing to allow suffering in our lives "for a season" to accomplish it (1 Peter 1:6).

It will require faith to allow the trial to do its divinely appointed work. But, if we believe that God has ordered it for our good and blessing, and that He has something to teach us in it, we will be more inclined to submit to Him in the trial. It will work toward the formation of our character and the moral qualities that go into making us mature (“perfect”) Christians. Thus, we will grow spiritually. David spoke of this; he said, "In pressure Thou hast enlarged me" (Psa. 4:1). One great result in submitting to the trial in faith is that we become “complete, wanting nothing.” We will lack nothing as far as the formation of our Christian character is concerned.

Job displayed this spirit of submission when his multi-faceted trial came on him. He "arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped, and said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away: blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:20-21). Faith believes that God is over all things, and that He is good and only appoints what is for the good of His people. In Job's case, God used the trial to make a good man better. In the middle chapters of the book of Job, Job developed a bad spirit when provoked by his three friends, and he became bitter, but God prevailed, and in the end, Job repented and got a blessing from it. Job's problem was not in his actions, but in his attitude. He was "perfect" outwardly (Job 1:1), but God wanted him to be perfect inwardly too (Job 23:10). That God would go to such lengths in the troubles He allowed in Job's life shows the

importance that He puts on His people having a right attitude. The lesson for us here is that if we do not have a right spirit, the trial could make us bitter rather than better, and thus we will miss out on the blessing that God has for us in it.

Some things to remember which will help us to accept our trials from the hand of God in a right spirit are:

Our trial is divinely timed (Job 23:14).

Our suffering in the trial has been divinely measured (Job 34:23).

We will be divinely endowed with grace to handle it (1 Cor. 10:13).

We will be divinely compensated (1 Peter 1:6-7).

An Exercised Heart

The fourth thing that we need in order to profit from trials is an exercised heart that seeks God's face in prayer in regard to the trial (vs. 5). James, therefore, encourages us to get into the presence of God in prayer and commit our situation to Him, asking Him for wisdom to know how to handle the problem properly. He says, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth [reproaches] not; and it shall be given him." If we are truly concerned about what God has for us in the trial—though we may not know why the circumstances have occurred in the way in which they have—it will "yield the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby" (Heb. 12:11).

Eliphaz exhorted Job to seek God's face in his trial. He said, "I would seek unto God, and unto God would I commit my cause" (Job 5:8). This will always be a fruitful exercise. Someone once said, "We should never let adversity get us down—except on our knees." Faith will see the difficulty as coming from the hand of God and will go to Him about it. God wants us to come to Him with our difficulties and troubles; He has promised to give us “wisdom” in the trial so that we will know how to deal with those things that assail us. James assures us that the wisdom we need for those trying situations "shall be given" to us, if we "ask" Him for it. He never “upbraids [reproaches]” us for coming to Him for help. This should encourage us to go to Him in prayer all the more. Trials, therefore, have a way of drawing us closer to the Lord—and that is certainly a good thing.

James adds, "But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering." While we may lack wisdom for the situation, we should never lack faith. Note also: James does not tell us to ask God to help us get out of the trial, but that we might have divine wisdom in the trial. Naturally speaking, we would like to get out of the trial—and that is understandable—but it is not what James encourages us to ask for. He would have us to seek grace and wisdom from God in the trial, and to try to profit from it.

These four things which we have mentioned will be evident in the life of a person who has faith in the time of trial. In fact, the most difficult circumstances in life are our greatest opportunities to manifest our faith in God (Job 13:15). It will be evident by the way in which we respond in trials.

The Danger of Not Meeting Trials With Faith

Vss. 6-8—James goes on to speak of the dangers of not meeting trials in faith. He says, "He that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord." It is futile to go to God about certain difficulties in our lives, if we don't come to Him in real faith. If we ask the Lord for help in a trial, but we don’t believe that He will do anything for us, we prove to be “double-minded” and faithless in the matter. All such doubters will not “receive anything of the Lord.” This shows that answers to prayers can be hindered by unbelief.

A person may claim to be a believer, but if he is not a true believer, his prayer life will manifest it. Trials have a way of bringing this out. Who we really are becomes evident in times of trial. If a person's faith is only a professed thing, he will not truly turn to God in the trial—though there may be a pretence of doing it. He or she will be seen turning to human resources and other things for help.

Rewards for Exercising Faith and Wisdom in Trials

Vss. 9-12—James shows that the positive effects of trials are worked out in people from all walks of life—they touch everyone's lives in one way or another. He takes up two extremes to demonstrate this—a poor man and a rich man.

A "brother of low degree" (a poor man) rejoices because the lessons he learns in his trials cause him to value more deeply what he has in his "exalted" place with Christ. He rejoices in his spiritual blessings. He also learns practical lessons in regard to the compassions of God by receiving help from God in his times of need. The result is that the Lord becomes more precious to him.

The "rich" man, on the other hand, learns valuable lessons in humility ("humiliation") by passing through trials. He learns that his money cannot insulate him from trouble, and thus he is cast on God like every other believer. Trials have a way of "whittling" rich men down to the size of an average man. They have a way of teaching him dependence, which all men must learn. James doesn't say, "Let the rich man rejoice in his riches," but rather that he should rejoice in that he is "made low," and thus made more like Christ (Matt. 11:29). This shows that there is something valuable in learning humility. The rich man is taught not to trust in himself, nor in "uncertain riches," but in God (1 Tim. 6:17).

In light of eternity, the temporal advantages that a rich man has will not last. To emphasize this point, James reminds us that as "the sun" rises with "burning heat" and "withers the grass" and "the flower," so also will "the rich man fade away in his ways." While James is referring to rich men generally, the rich man who has faith can learn from his trial (if taken rightly) that material riches are nothing in comparison to divine and eternal things. He may know this intellectually, but the trial will help to know consciously and practically. His focus in day to day living will get turned away from temporal things toward eternal things in a more real way, and thus he will value them more deeply.

The point in these verses is that, whether a person is rich or poor, he can derive lasting spiritual benefits from the trials of life, if they are taken in faith. The poor man and the rich man can rejoice alike in the fact that moral and spiritual qualities are being produced in them by enduring trials.

Vs. 12—James passes on to give a word of encouragement to the one who "endures temptation" (trial). He says, "Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love Him." He shows that there is a present and a future reward for passing through trials with the Lord. There is a present blessedness. ("Blessed" means to be happy.) This refers to an inner joy that is given to those who walk with the Lord in their trial. It results from knowing that we are the special objects of His care in the particular trial that He has given us. This joy is known only to those who take the trial from the Lord in faith. Then, there is also a future reward of receiving a “crown of life” in the day of reckoning. This would be at the judgment seat of Christ (Rom. 14:10-12; 1 Cor. 3:13; 4:5; 2 Cor. 5:10; Matt. 25:20-23). This teaches us that the Lord values faith, and that He will reward it in a coming day.

However, if we rebel against the things that the Lord has given us to bear, we not only lose our present joy in the Lord and the spiritual profit that God intends for us to gain from the trial, but we also lose a future reward. James adds that these present joys and future rewards are promised "to them that love Him" and endure the trial in faith. This shows that the trials that the Lord gives us to bear are an excellent way for us to show our love to Him. Taking them from His hand in submission is indeed a beautiful thing to Him; He values it and will reward us in that day.

Summary of the Good Things that Trials Produce in Our Lives if Taken in Faith

They are opportunities to manifest our faith (vs. 3).

They work endurance in us (vs. 3).

They produce spiritual maturity (vs. 4).

They teach us dependence on God (vss. 5-6).

They teach us to value eternal things (vss. 9-11).

We will be rewarded for enduring them—presently and in the future (vs. 12).

They are opportunities to prove our love for the Lord Jesus (vs. 12).

Temptations From Within

Vss. 13-15—James goes on to speak of the other kind of temptation—the temptation to sin. As mentioned, these are unholy trials which emanate from the fallen sin-nature. Note: James does not say, “Count it all joy” here, as he did with the first kind of temptation. Satan would like to present these things to us as something that will make us happy, but it's a lie. In reality—and we all know from experience—giving way to the lusts of the flesh does not bring happiness. It leaves us unsatisfied and out of communion with God. James shows in this series of verses that we can overcome these temptations to sin if they are met with faith.

He begins by clearly stating that these kinds of temptations do not come from God. He says, "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God. God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth He any man." James mentions this because the natural tendency of the human heart is to shift the responsibility for our wrong-doing onto someone else. However, we cannot blame God for our sinful lusts. God does not tempt people to do what He hates; He will test our faith in various ways, but He will not tempt us to do evil.

Sin emanates from our own wills acting; and it all comes from within the human heart. The Lord taught, "For from within, out the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: all these evil things come from within, and defile the man" (Mark 7:21-23). The simple truth is that we sin because we choose to sin. A believer may “enter” into these kinds of temptations, if he or she chooses to do so (Matt. 26:41). Therefore, we are fully responsible for allowing sin in our lives.

James shows us the fruit of allowing lust within. There is a course, or a chain of things, that works out in our lives. It begins with "lust" conceived in the heart, and if not judged in the presence of God (1 John 1:9), it bears fruit in acts of "sin," which ultimately results in "death." His point is unmistakably clear; if we allow lustful thoughts to linger in our hearts, they will surely bring forth sin and death in our lives.

It may be asked, "In what way does allowing sin in a person's life bring forth death?" "Death," in Scripture, always has the thought of separation of some kind. It depends on the context of the passage; it could be separation of the soul and spirit from the body in physical death (James 2:26), or it could be the separation of the unbeliever from the presence of God forever in a lost eternity (Rev. 20:6, 14 – "the second death"), etc. Sin, in its fullest sense, results in physical death (Gen. 2:17; Rom. 5:12), and, if a person is not saved, it result in eternal separation from God. In regard to a believer allowing sin in his or her life, it is referring to death in a moral sense. That is, there will be a disconnection in his communion with God practically, whereby no fruit can be produced in his life. The Apostle Paul speaks of this aspect of death in Romans 8:13: "For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die." (See also 1 Timothy 5:6.)

Vss. 16-18—In connection with the foregoing remarks, James says, "Do not err, my beloved brethren." Essentially, he is saying, "Don't make a mistake ("err") in thinking that you can get something good through lust." Every time we think that we can get something good through gratifying our lusts, we make a mistake; it only produces moral death in our lives. We are left unhappy, unsatisfied, and out of communion with God.

How Temptations From Within Are to Be Handled

James goes on to show us how these kinds of temptations are to be handled so that we don't sin in these situations. Firstly, we need to remember that God is a good God and a giving God, who provides for all of His creatures. Everything that the child of God needs for his happiness “comes down from the Father of lights;” it does not come by reaching out for it through lust. We need to keep this great fact before our souls because the tendency is to lose sight of it in times of temptation.

James notes that there are two kinds of gifts that God gives to men. There are “good” gifts, which are the natural things in life that He gives to all mankind (Eccl. 3:13; 5:19; Acts 14:17; 1 Tim. 6:17), and then there are “perfect” gifts, which are spiritual things that God gives to believers

(Rom. 6:23; John 4:10; 1 Thess. 4:8; Eph. 2:8; 4:7). This shows that God is the Source and Giver of every good and perfect thing. He will supply all our needs—naturally and spiritually—in His good time (Phil. 4:19). He is not the originator of sinful temptations within. We must have faith to believe this in order to conquer sinful lusts.

Moreover, James calls God "the Father of Lights." This indicates that He is an all-knowing and all-caring God. "Father" speaks of tenderness, love, and care. It means that He is not an impersonal God who acts without feeling towards His creatures. "Lights" emphasizes His infinite knowledge and understanding of every situation in life. It means that He knows our situation in life perfectly, and will provide what we need according to His great goodness. James adds, "With whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning." This means that there is no changeableness in God's disposition toward us; His intentions to bless and provide for us cannot not be altered (Mal. 3:6). He is not a fickle God. We can be sure, therefore, that He will do the very best for us in our situation in life. Faith believes this. It believes that God is the Bestower of every benefit that we enjoy—naturally and spiritually—and looks to Him to provide what is needed in His good time. This kind of confidence in God pleases Him greatly (Psa. 118:8-9).

However, the believer's faith is the very thing that Satan attacks (Luke 22:32). His aim is to shake our confidence in the goodness of God. When we have a need that is not immediately filled by God, we are being tested by Him in the matter. When Satan sees this, he will suggest to us that God is holding back something good from us. He will also suggest that we should, therefore, take action for ourselves in the matter. If our confidence in God is shaken, we will likely entertain Satan's suggestions and reach out for that thing which we think we need. However, when acting in self-will and in independence of God, we bring forth sin and death in our lives. Mr. H. E. Hayhoe rightly said, "Unbelief in the goodness of God is the root of all our failures."

This is exactly the line upon which Satan tempted Eve in the garden of Eden. He told her that eating the fruit of the tree would make them "as gods" (Gen. 3:5), and that God was holding that good thing back from them. When her faith was shaken as to God's goodness and she believed that if she took the fruit it would improve her and her husband's position, she took the forbidden thing and ate it. But it was all a lie. Taking the fruit did not improve Adam and Eve and make them as God; it made them sinners.

Satan tried the same tactic on the Lord in the temptations in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-13). In essence, he said to Him, "If you are the Son of God, why doesn't God look after you in one of the most basic things in life—your need of food?" Behind this temptation was an attempt to get the Lord to pity Himself in that situation. The devil as much as said to Him, "You're starving here; this shouldn't happen to a godly man!" Then, he suggested that the Lord should use His Godhead power to supply that need—which God evidently was not supplying. But to do so, He would be taking a step in independence of God. Note how subtle Satan is: he told the Lord to make the stone into bread; he didn't go so far as to tell Him to eat it! He knew from his experience with human behavior that it wouldn't take long for a hungry man, who saw food in front of him, to reach out and eat it. But Satan was defeated in this ruse by the Lord's faith in God (Psa. 16:1) and the Lord's obedience to God's Word (Psa. 17:4).

The devil has been using this tactic on men and women since the beginning of time. It shows us how subtle he is (2 Cor. 11:3) and also how deceptive the human heart is (Jer. 17:9). Hence, James is teaching us that we can overcome these temptations to sin by having faith in God's goodness—and this will be evident by our waiting on Him to supply our needs.

Vs. 18—James then speaks of God's great sovereignty. "Of His own will begat He us with the Word of truth." This is referring to our new birth (John 3:3-5; 1 Peter 1:23). He was not forced to do this great act of kindness and mercy—He did it of His "own will" and out of the goodness of His heart. He initiated our spiritual life in the first place, and in doing so, He has made it His responsibility to care for us and to sustain us in the path of faith. If we indeed are His children, why would we think that He will not care for us, and that we have to sin to sustain our practical needs? Moreover, Christians are the "firstfruits of His creatures." We have thus been given a unique and very favoured place among all of God's creatures. Being so favoured as we are, it is even more ludicrous to think that He will not provide for us (Isa. 49:15).

Hence, as there is a right and wrong way to react to temptations (trials) from without, there is also a right and wrong way to react to temptations within. As to the latter, we can allow ourselves to be “enticed” in our lusts and get "drawn away"—but it will only bring forth moral "death." Or, we can wait in faith on the Father of Lights to supply our needs in His good time.

How a person responds in these situations in life will give an index as to where he is in his soul spiritually. If a person does not trust God and does not judge himself, but habitually succumbs to lusts and sins as a way of life, it calls into question whether he or she has faith at all. The falseness of a person's professed faith is thus exposed. A believer may sin and fail in his life, but he will repent and judge himself, and rise up and go on in the path of faith (Prov. 24:16). Falling down does not make a person a failure in life; it is staying down that does. Falling down does not mean that a person is not saved, but staying down calls into question whether he is. A person who is not a real believer in the Lord Jesus Christ will remain in his sins as a habitual course of life, and by this he will show that his profession of faith is not real.

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The point that James is making in this first section of verses is that temptations—whether they are from without or from within—manifest where a person is in his soul. Thus, trials and temptations in life are really opportunities to manifest our faith and to show that we are real believers.

The Epistle Of James: The Reality Of Faith Proved In the Circumstances Of Everyday Life, James 1:19-27: Faith Proved by How We Receive the Word of God

The next subject that James addresses is how we treat the Word of God—the Scriptures. Having mentioned “the Word of truth” by which we have been born again (vs. 18), he goes on to speak of the place that it should have in our lives. In this next series of verses, James shows that the way in which a person handles the Word of God will manifest whether he or she has real faith or not.

The Jewish converts to whom James was writing had identified themselves with the Christian company, and were attending the meetings where the Word of God was ministered (Acts 2:42). However, it wasn't long before some of them gave indications that they might not be real
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believers (Gal. 2:4; Titus 1:10-16). Thus, it became evident that there was a mixed multitude among them. Knowing this, James teaches us that the way a person receives and responds to the Word of God will manifest the reality of his or her profession. Those who are not real will show it by habitually being “hearers only.” They will listen to the Word being ministered, but it will have no practical effect in their lives. On the other hand, a person with real faith in Christ will show himself to be a genuine believer by being a “doer of the Word.” James, therefore, focuses on two things in this passage:

Being receptive of the Word of God (vss. 19-21).

Being responsive to the Word of God (vss. 22-27).

Receiving the Word of God

Vss. 19-21—As stated already, James addresses certain idiosyncrasies that were peculiar to the Jewish mindset and way of life which they tended to carry over into Christianity. These were "graveclothes" that needed to be taken off these new converts. One such thing, in connection with the Word of God, was their love of sitting in the synagogue on Sabbath days, and discussing and disputing the things that were read from the Scriptures (Acts 17:2-3, 17; 18:4; 28:19). They imagined themselves to be masters (teachers) and critics of the truth (Rom. 2:19-20; 1 Tim. 1:7), and they loved to debate their opinions. While this may have been tolerated in the synagogues in Judaism, it is something that has no place in Christianity (2 Tim. 2:14). God would have Christians to gather together to hear the Word of God read and expounded (1 Tim. 4:13), but such occasions were not to deteriorate to the debating of one's opinions (2 Tim. 2:14).

James begins by stating the right and proper posture we are to have in the presence of the Word of God. He says, “Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.” These short, but pointed, exhortations, show that there is to be reverence for God's Word when it is opened and read, and it should result in self-restraint on the part of the hearer (Psa. 119:161).

Firstly, we need to be “swift to hear.” This refers to a readiness of mind to hear and receive the truth of the Word of God. We should be eager to seize every opportunity for learning it. The person who has a teachable spirit—taking the seat of a humble learner and listening intently when the Word of God is ministered—will most certainly profit from the occasion (Deut. 33:3; Luke 8:35; 10:39).

Secondly, we should be “slow to speak.” This is a reference in regard to making remarks on Scripture. We know in part, and at best, we can only prophesy in part (1 Cor. 13:9). To assume to be an authority on the truth of God is to think of ourselves more highly than we ought (Rom. 12:3). It manifests an ignorance of the greatness of God's Word (Psa. 138:2). James, therefore, insists on a restraint being made on the desire to project our thoughts on Scripture. In chapter 3:1, he warns against wanting to have the role of a teacher and a communicator of divine knowledge, because all such are held to a greater standard of responsibility. The person who is constantly transmitting his opinions and views is not in a position to receive truth and to grow in his understanding of the divine revelation. Therefore, comments on the Scriptures should be made with caution and a conscious realization that it is God's holy and infallible Word that we are commenting on.

Thirdly, we must be “slow to wrath.” Sad to say, fleshly discussions over the truth of God's Word can sometimes result in heat and anger. This was all too often the case with the Jews in their synagogues. James, therefore, insists on the restraint of such fiery passions. Trying to get our point across by raising our voice and arguing will never help advance the declaration of the truth, because, as James says, “the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.” God will not identify with such fleshly actions. The truth of God should be communicated and received in a setting of quietness and peace (Deut. 33:3; Eccl. 9:17; Luke 8:35; 10:39).

Vs. 21—James goes on to show that in receiving the Word of God there should not only be self-restraint, but also self-judgment. If we expect to profit from reading God's Word, it is imperative that we lay aside all “filthiness” and “overflowing of wickedness.” Without this necessary judgment of self, "the engrafted [implanted] Word" will never properly take hold in our souls and cause us to grow. If the soil in a garden is full of weeds, the roots of a good plant will not take hold and grow properly. A wise gardener, therefore, prepares the soil by pulling up unwanted weeds that choke out the growth of good plants. Similarly, we must prepare our hearts to “receive” the Word by getting rid of everything in our lives that is inconsistent with God's holy nature (1 Peter 2:1-2). This is done through self-judgment (2 Cor. 7:1).

The spirit in which we are to receive the Word is that of "meekness." This indicates a reverence for the Word and the One who has given it to us. James calls it “the engrafted [implanted] Word” because, if received properly, it will take root in us and become an integral part of our lives. The Apostle John speaks of this, saying, “The Word of God abideth in you” (1 John 2:14).

James adds, “Which is able to save your souls.” For those who were not saved (the mere professors among them), reception of the Word of God in faith would result in their eternal salvation. But for those who were saved, there would be a great practical benefit in having the engrafted Word as an integral part of their Christian life. If there is obedience to the principles of God's Word, the believer can be saved from the many spiritual dangers and pitfalls in the path of faith (Psa. 17:4).

Responding to the Word of God

Vss. 22-25—James, therefore, goes on to speak of the importance of responding to the Word in practical obedience. He exhorts us, not to be “hearers only,” but also “doers of the Word.” Ezra is a good example of this. It says that he “prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it” (Ezra 7:10). This, then, is another test of a person's reality. If he or she has faith, being a real believer, it will be evident by obedience to the Word. A believer may, at times, fail to put the Word of God into practice in his life as he should, but he is characteristically a doer of the Word. If, on the other hand, a person habitually neglects to practice the principles in the Word, it calls into question whether he or she is a real believer. It may very well mean that such are not saved at all.

We are told in Hebrews 6:4-5 that it's possible for an unbeliever to come in among Christians where God's Word is ministered, and thus taste "the good Word of God" and partake of what "the Holy Spirit" is doing there in an outward way—yet remain unsaved. Such people would be "hearers only" in its primary sense; the Word has never been received in faith. However, trafficking in the truth, without being a doer of it, is a dangerous thing; it can lead to self-deception. James adds, "Deceiving your ownselves." Many a person has been spiritually blinded in some way because of his unwillingness to obey Scripture after he heard it. James says that he is like a person who looks into a “mirror,” and then goes away and forgets what he saw—thus, it produces no effect in him. Note: it is ourselves that we deceive, not others around us. People

who know us are not usually deceived by our hypocrisy.

This empty facade of being "a hearer of the Word, and not a doer" has had a history among the Jews. Those in the days of Ezekiel are an example. The Lord told him that the people would come and sit before him as the people of God should do in the presence of a prophet of God, but they wouldn't do what he said. “They will hear thy words, but they will not do them: for with their mouth they show much love, but their heart goeth after their covetousness. And, lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument: for they hear thy words, but they do them not” (Ezek. 33:31-32). The Pharisees, in the time when the Lord was on earth, were the spiritual descendants of those in Ezekiel's day. The Lord said of them, "All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not" (Matt. 23:3). This problem is not something exclusive to the Jews, we all know how easy it is to read the Bible without being affected by what we read. We all need to be exercised about this.

Vs. 25—James goes on to state that being a doer of the Word should not be a burden to a believer, because to be asked to do something that you want to do is not a burden; it's a joy. This is what James calls “the perfect law of liberty.” It is mentioned in contrast to the law of Moses. The Mosaic law is occupied with restraining the impulses of the old nature. It is filled with the often-repeated, negative phrase, “Thou shalt not ... ” To attempt to perform all those injunctions was a burden to all who were under that obligation (Matt. 11:28; Acts 15:10). The law of liberty, on the other hand, focuses on encouraging and directing the new nature in positive things that the new life delights in doing. It is marked by the phrase, “Let us ... ” Doing these things is not a burden for the new nature because it delights to do the will of God marked out in His Word (Psa. 40:8). Similarly, to ask a horse to eat hay is, to a horse, perfect liberty—it’s exactly what it wants to do! However, to ask a dog to eat hay is another thing—it's pure bondage to him. Hence, the man walking in the Spirit enjoys doing the will of God; it's not a burden to him. The perfect law of liberty, therefore, is when the Lord’s commands and the believer's desires symphonize.

To encourage the practice of God's Word, James reminds his audience of the present reward for doers of it. He says, “He shall be blessed in his doing.” The root meaning of the word “blessed” is happy. Hence, the person who walks in the truth will be happy in his soul, because there is a joy in obeying the Word of God that is known only to those who do it. This is illustrated in the first miracle that the Lord Jesus did when He turned the water into wine (John 2). Drinking “water,” in Scripture, refers to the refreshment of the Word of God. “Wine,” in Scripture, often speaks of the joys of Christian living. In performing the miracle, let us ask, "When did the water turn to wine?" It was not when the servants poured the water into the vessels, but when they picked up those vessels and carried them out to the governor. Somewhere along the way, as they walked with the water, it turned into wine. Similarly, when we carry out the Word of God in our daily walk, it becomes a joy to us.

A Three-Fold Test of Reality

Vss. 26-27—Since there is a danger of professing faith without having inward reality, James shows that a man's religion is to be put to the test. He says, "If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this: To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world." ("Religion," in the sense that it is used here, is the profession and practice of certain religious beliefs and doctrines.) This statement shows that it is quite possible for a person to have an exterior that projects the image of being a real believer, but there is no inward reality. Hence, James presents three things by which all profession of true religion can be tested. He tells us that there will be unmistakable evidence of faith in a person's life. The Lord spoke of this in His ministry, saying, "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matt. 7:16, 20).

SELF-CONTROL—The first thing is self-control. If a person makes a profession of being “religious,” but habitually doesn’t control his tongue, it is a tell-tale sign that he may not be a real believer. The vanity of his religion is exposed as being merely a “vain” show in his life. He has deceived himself.

LOVE AND SYMPATHY—The second thing is love and sympathy. If a person’s faith is real, he will care about those who suffer, and it will be seen in his life by extending himself in some benevolent way to those who are in need—i.e. "the fatherless" (orphans) and the "widows."

PERSONAL HOLINESS—The third thing is personal holiness. This will be a result of practical separation from the world. If a person’s faith is real, then he will be careful about his associations and will “keep himself unspotted from the world.”

Hence, the reality of one’s faith in God and His Word will be evident in right speaking (vs. 26) and in benevolent actions towards the needy (vs. 27a), and in personal holiness maintained through separation from the world (vs. 27b). This shows that hearing the truth is not an end in itself; it is only the beginning. God wants inward reality in His people that results in practicing the truth (Psa. 51:6).

The Epistle Of James: The Reality Of Faith Proved In the Circumstances Of Everyday Life, James 5:1-13: Faith Proved by How We Handle Injustices

Vs. 1—The things before us in the first part of this chapter clearly show that some among these professed converts to Christianity were definitely not saved. The way in which James addresses these "rich men," shows that he did not consider them to be believers at all. He doesn't even call them "brethren"—which is how he has addressed his audience up to this point in the epistle (chap. 1:2, 9, 16, 19; 2:1, 14; 3:1, etc.).

James warns these false professors of the certainty of coming judgment. He tells them to "weep and howl" because their "miseries" were about to come upon them at any moment, and they would lose everything. Judgment was going to be meted out against them because of their faithlessness toward God and their ill treatment of the believing Jews. This happened in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Historians tell us that most Christians left the city of Jerusalem and the surrounding area before the Roman armies descended upon it. They heeded the warning given by the Lord in Luke 21:20-24. The unbelieving Jews did not heed the warning and were taken by the Romans, and subsequently fell under this judgment. So certain was this judgment that James tells these rich men to start their weeping now.

Four Outstanding Sins of the Rich

Vss. 2-6—He accused them of four specific things:

Hoarding up treasures—vss. 2-3.

Fraudulent practices in dealing with their employees—vs. 4.

Self-indulgence—vs. 5.

Persecuting their brethren (the just)—vs. 6.

What was at the bottom of their unbridled lust to gain wealth and power was the sin of covetousness. It drove them on in their wicked practices. It was especially sad that these evil practices were done at the expense of those with whom they professed mutual faith—their own brethren! Hence, the strongest rebuke in the epistle is given to these false professors.

Vss. 2-3—Even though the sin of hoarding is condemned in the Scriptures (Eccl. 5:10-13; Psa. 39:6; Prov. 23:4-5), these rich Jews, who would have been familiar with those Scriptures, "heaped treasure together for the last days." James warns them that God's judgment was against this practice. To emphasize the brevity of material possessions, he tells them that their "garments are moth-eaten" and their "gold and silver is cankered." Their treasures would be corrupted and become useless. The point here is that riches can be hoarded up to the point that they become spoiled and useless. On a very practical note, it shows us that it's not God's will for people to hoard clothes in their wardrobes and to stock pile money in banks.

The Bible does not say that it is a sin to be rich, but it does teach that hoarding riches is a sin. Unconsecrated riches is what James is rebuking here. In the plainest language the Lord Jesus taught, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal" (Matt. 6:19).

The sad thing about the wealth that these Jews had acquired was that it had been gotten by unjust means. James assures them that they would be rewarded accordingly. They would have their eyes opened to see the demise of their wealth: "Their canker shall be for a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as fire." This is figurative language indicating that these rich men would have great remorse at the loss of their possessions—not to mention the loss of their souls (Mark 8:36). The lesson here is that it is foolish to hoard one's possessions—be it food, clothing, or money. These rich men had heaped treasure together for "the last days," but they would not live to the last days to enjoy them because the Romans were going to invade and destroy the land.

Vs. 4—The second great sin that these rich Jews were guilty of was cheating their employees through fraudulent practices. "The hire [wages]" of the labourers who had reaped down their fields was being "kept back by fraud." This was not an oversight on their part, but a deliberate action of short paying their poor farm workers. What made this so sad was that many of these were their own brethren whom they mutually professed faith in the Lord Jesus! This was not only a violation of the Law of Moses (Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24-14-15), but it was contrary to the teaching of the Lord Jesus (Luke 6:31, 36). It was also contrary to the teaching of the Apostle Paul (Col. 4:1). It is clear that their profession of faith was not real.

James told these rich men that God had seen their wicked practices and that He had heard the cries of His suffering people. "The cries of them which have reaped are entered into the ears of the Lord of sabaoth [hosts]." We might be tempted to think that the Lord is indifferent to the injustices that are leveled against us, but it's not true. Just because He does not act on our timetable doesn't mean that He doesn't care. The Apostle Peter reminds all who might be tempted to think such things: "He careth for you" (1 Peter 5:7). The Lord is deeply interested in everything that touches His people (Exodus 2:23-24; Zechariah 2:8). The point in mentioning "the Lord of Hosts" here is to emphasize the fact that He who commands the hosts of heaven is strong on behalf of His suffering people who are unjustly trodden down. God's governmental dealings with all who accumulate wealth by oppressing their employees will meet with their just retribution.

Vs. 5—The third sin of these rich men was self-indulgence. They lived in pleasure and extravagance. James says, "Ye have lived luxuriously [in pleasure] on earth and indulged yourselves." Such a lifestyle can lead to insensibility to the needs of others. These unjust hoarders lived with self at the center of their lives, while those whom they took advantage of were in need. They "nourished" themselves "as in a day of slaughter." This is an image taken from soldiers greedily looting the spoils of their conquered enemies in a scramble for wealth.

Vs. 6—The fourth evil of these rich men was their persecution of the righteous. They "condemned and killed the just" followers of Christ. In doing so, they were manifesting the same character of unbelief and wickedness as the unbelieving Jews who killed Christ—"the Holy One and the Just" (Acts 3:14). The killing of the righteous here refers to "judicial" murders. That is, these wicked rich men would get the judicial system to execute judgment (falsely) on these righteous believers. This is seen in the fact that their condemnation is mentioned before they were killed. These poor people were haled to court and accused unjustly by these unscrupulous and wicked men (chap. 2:6). Having no means of defending themselves, they were executed under the judicial system. "And he doth not resist you" apparently refers to these poor accused persons having no power to resist the injustice.

These things show us what covetousness can lead to. What began as an undue emphasis on amassing wealth, ended with murdering those who were in the way of achieving that goal! This ought to be a severe warning to Christians not to allow themselves to get caught up in accumulating wealth. Unconsecrated riches will destroy their owners.

The Dangers of Reacting Wrongly to Injustices

Done Against Us

Vss. 7-13—Having warned the unbelieving rich men in this mixed company of professed converts, James returns to address those who are true believers, calling them "brethren."

These poor people were being taken advantage of—especially in the workplace. The question is, what were they to do about these injustices? Since there is a real possibility of letting those things, by which we have been wronged, bother us to the point of getting into a bad state of soul, James anticipates three fleshly responses in which a person might understandably have in these situations, and exhorts his audience accordingly.

1) Retaliating (vss. 7-8).

The first thing that James addresses is the tendency to want to retaliate—to get revenge. However, he does not present that as the answer for his suffering brethren. Instead, he says, "Be patient, therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord" (vs. 7). This is a reference to the Appearing of Christ. (The truth of the Rapture was a unique revelation given to the Apostle Paul to bring to the saints; it is unlikely that it was known at the time of the writing of this epistle.)

In answer to these injustices, James does not say, "Form a trade union, brethren. Stand up for your rights in this world and fight back against these things." No, they were not to strike back at these injustices, but wait patiently for the Lord to come. Just as a "husbandman" (a farmer), after sowing seed in the ground, must wait for "the early and latter rain" to come before he harvests his crop, so also these suffering brethren were to patiently wait for "the coming of the Lord" (vs. 8). They needed to show their faith by having patience and endurance in the face of these injustices from their false brethren (the unbelieving Jews). This is emphasized by the word "patience" being used five times in these few verses. The Apostle Peter confers with this: "When ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God" (1 Peter 2:20).

The point that James is making here is that the evils in this world will not be set right until the Lord appears and takes the reins of government in His hand (Rev. 11:15). Christians are to "be patient" and to wait until then. To take up the wrongs in society now in this day and try to set them right is to move before the Lord does in the matter. There is a "time of setting things right" coming for this world (Heb. 9:10); it will begin when the Lord intervenes in judgment. Then righteousness will reign (Isa. 32:1).

If we live any length of time in this world, we will inevitably encounter something being done to us unjustly—either in the workplace or in private life. The struggle between capitalists and the labour class still exists today. What should Christians do about industrial strife and other unjust things taking place in society ? They are not to join the confederations of men that have been set up to fight these injustices—well intentioned as they are—but simply to "be patient" unto "the coming of the Lord." There will be a time of righting the wrongs in society when the Lord righteously judges this world for 1000 years (Acts 17:31). Scripture does not teach Christians are to get involved in setting things right now because we are "not of this world" (John 18:36). If we feel that we have been taken advantage of, the Word of God says, "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place to wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is Mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (Rom. 12:19). As we wait, we are to commit ourselves to Him who judges righteously in all these things.

These situations are another area in life where we can manifest the reality of our faith. Since we are objects of God's grace, and the recipients of many spiritual blessings and privileges, we can afford to show grace to others—even though they have despitefully treated us (Luke 6:28). It may be that such an attitude could be used to convert some to Christ (Rom. 12:20-21; Prov. 25:21-22).

2) Complaining (vss. 9-11).

Another tendency is to “complain” about the situation. However, complaining manifests a bad spirit; it is often born out of not submitting to what God has allowed in our lives. James, therefore, says, "Complain not one against another, brethren." He also warns that if it developed into a chronic problem, God our Father might have to deal with us in a governmental way to correct our bad attitude. He reminds us that "the Judge" stands "before the door." That is, God our Father is ready to act as a judge in our lives, if need be (1 Peter 1:17). The KJV says "condemned" and "condemnation" (vss. 9, 12) but it should be translated "judged" and "judgment." (This mis-translation also occurs in John 3:18-19). Condemnation is an irrevocable and final thing from which a person cannot be delivered. All who are not saved in the world are presently "under judgment to God," but they are not yet condemned (Rom. 3:19; John 3:36). The judgment of God is a sentence from which a person can be delivered, if they come to Christ and get saved (John 5:24). In doing so, they are not only delivered from judgment, but they are also set in a position before God "in Christ" where they cannot come into "condemnation" (Rom. 8:1). If, however, men will not believe, their "judgment" will be "to condemnation" (Rom. 5:16).

As an example of how we are to behave in these trying situations, James points to the prophets in old times. They suffered "affliction" with "patience." All who have followed after them in the path of faith "call [count] them blessed" because they "endured" suffering patiently (vs. 11). We respect and honour them for their lives of zeal and devotion. One of the patriarchs in particular ("Job") is set before us as a example of the "endurance" we need to have in our suffering. “The end of the Lord” refers to the end the Lord had in view for Job in his trial. He was a good man made better, and thus "the Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning" (Job 42:12). He found something very good indeed by enduring the trial.

3) Swearing With Oaths (vss. 12-13).

Another thing that we may be tempted to do when we have been taken advantage of is to swear that we will get revenge. James anticipates this, and says, "Above all things, my brethren, swear not , neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath" (vs. 12). In these situations, we might be inclined to call on God to bring judgment on those who have wronged us. But as Christians, we are not to pray imprecatory prayers of judgment on others. The Lord is our example in this: "When He suffered, he threatened not" (1 Peter 2:23).

Our place is to wait for the Lord to work in these matters. Judgment is His work, not ours. He might even set some things right before the day of setting things right comes. He could very well cause some to rectify the wrongs that they have done to us—it is His prerogative. Swearing with oaths and vows were common practice in the old Mosaic economy (Num. 30; Eccl. 5:4-6), but invoking the name of God, or heaven, or earth, in the heat of passion for retaliatory reasons against our enemies is not the Christian way to handle wrongs. We are simply to let our "yea be yea" and our "nay, nay" in all of our interactions with men. That is, our word in saying "yes" or "no" ought to be enough for men to trust us, because our Christian character is such that we do what we say we are going to do, and there is no need for us to back our word up with oaths.

Instead of looking up to heaven and swearing by an oath, James tells us that we are to look up to heaven and "pray." He says, “Does anyone among you suffer evil? Let him pray” (vs. 13). This is the Christian's true resource if he has been treated unfairly. Again, the Lord Jesus is our example. When He was ill-treated, He "committed Himself to Him that judgeth righteously" (1 Peter 2:23).

James concludes this subject by saying, "Is any merry? Let him sing praise” (W. Kelly Trans.). In saying this, he anticipated the faith of the saints rising to the point where they would take these things from the Lord in the spirit of praise and thanksgiving. Many persecuted saints have done just this. They have risen above the evils against them so significantly that they have actually gone to their death singing praise to

the Lord! (Acts 5:41; 16:25; Heb. 10:34) This is the ultimate proof of the reality of a person’s faith.

The grand point to see in all this is that God is not indifferent to the injustices of His people. He will deal with it all in His good time. In the meantime, we are not to take matters into our own hands and avenge ourselves. We must leave it to the Lord: "Vengeance is mine, I will repay" (Rom. 12:19). Until that time, the answer for us is to "bear evils" in a spirit of longsuffering patience (2 Tim. 4:5). This manifests true faith that believes that the Lord will set everything right in His time. It also practically manifests the fact that we are not living for this world, but for another world where Christ is the center.

The Epistle Of James: The Reality Of Faith Proved In the Circumstances Of Everyday Life, James 5:14-20: Faith Proved by Our Care for the Sick (Physically & Spiritually)

Vss. 14-18—In the old Mosaic economy, if a person walked uprightly with God, he was promised the mercies of God in his everyday life. One such mercy was to have good health. A faithful and obedient person could count on being preserved from sickness (Ex. 15:26; Deut. 7:15). However, in Christianity, this is not necessarily the case, though there is a special preserving care for "those that believe," over and above the care God has for all men (1 Tim. 4:10). Being a believer on the Lord Jesus Christ does not mean that we are exempt from getting sick. For example, the Apostle Paul walked with God but had "infirmities" in his body (2 Cor. 12:7-10). In this present economy, God uses such things as sickness in the path of faith to teach us valuable lessons and to form our Christian characters.

It is, therefore, a mistake to think that the gospel call includes a promise of wealth and freedom from sickness. Those who preach this false, "prosperity gospel" are mixing Judaic principles with Christianity. Such a message plays upon the covetous nature of fallen men and women, and draws them into the Christian profession for ulterior reasons—to gain health and wealth. In many cases there has not been a real work of faith in their souls at all. Scripture indicates that God may allow sickness to come our way as a means to correct us, if need be. Or, He may allow sickness in our lives, even when we are walking uprightly. Whatever the case is, if sickness does touch us, we need to understand that everything that happens in our lives is allowed of the Lord for our good and blessing. We are not to view a sickness coming upon us as an accident, but to see the Lord’s hand in it. This principle was mentioned in the first chapter.

The Prayer of the Elders

Vss. 14-15—Under the old covenant, God was faithful to all that He promised. Even when they had gone far from Him, and He had to chasten them, He remembered them in mercy (Hab. 3:2) and gave them manifestations of His healing power when some were sick. The strange happenings that occurred at "the pool of Siloam" are an example of this (John 5:1-5). An angel would come down at certain times and stir the waters of the pool and the person who got into the pool first got healed. Since these acts of mercy were intermittent, a person would have to wait quite some time for such an act of God to happen—and the blessing that was dispensed was always based on a person having to do something to gain it (Gal. 3:12).

Now that these Jewish converts were gathered on Christian ground and were in the assembly where "the name of the Lord" was, they had a resource for cases of sickness that was superior to what they had known in Judaism. A sick person could "call for the elders of the assembly" to come and "pray over him." They would anoint him "with oil" in the name of the Lord Jesus, and their "prayer of faith" would "heal the sick." This was not an intermittent thing, as was the case at the pool of Siloam, but something that could be done at any time. By calling for the elders "of the assembly," the person manifested faith in the fact that there was now a new place where the authority of the Lord rested—in the assembly of saints gathered unto His name (Matt. 18:19-20; 1 Cor. 5:4).

James says, "The Lord shall raise him up." Note: the power for healing is not in the elders, though some individuals in that day may have had the gift of healing (1 Cor. 12:9). Nor is the power in "the oil" that the elders use. It is not a question of how much faith the elders have or how much faith the sick person has, but having simple faith in the Lord Jesus in regard to this mighty act of healing. It is “the Lord" who raises him up. All the credit and praise, therefore, must go to Him.

Some have thought that this procedure (of anointing a sick person with oil) was a special Jewish provision for that day when things were in transition from Judaism to Christianity, and thus it is not something for Christians today. This is deducted from the fact that the apostles used anointing oil in their earthly ministry, which was a ministry having to do with the kingdom being set up on earth (Mark 6:13). Therefore, since we are heavenly citizens in Christianity (Phil. 3:20), they conclude that we should not be employing such rituals in this economy. However, there are outward things that are used in Christian ordinances; bread and wine are used in the breaking of bread, literal water is used in baptism, and head coverings are worn by sisters. These are outward things that are used literally in Christianity today. Therefore, there is no reason to think that the literal use of oil in these cases is something that shouldn't be practiced in Christianity. H. A. Ironside mentions in his book on the epistle of James that Mr. Darby and Mr. Bellett acted on these verses in many places in Dublin, and there were many remarkable healings that resulted. Mr. J. B. Dunlop reports that he personally called for the elders to pray over him on four different occasions, and each time he was raised up.

Sickness on Account of Sin

Mr. Darby wrote, "I do not doubt that a large part of sickness and trials of Christians are chastenings sent by God on account of things that are evil in His sight, which the conscience ought to have paid heed to, but which it neglected. God has been forced to produce in us the effect which self-judgment ought to have produced before Him" ("The World or Christ," p. 10).

If the person's sickness is the result of God's dealing with him on account of specific sins in his life, and he is repentant, James says that his sins "shall be forgiven him." He states this as a promise. This is an example of where governmental forgiveness and administrative forgiveness coalesce. Governmental forgiveness has to do with God seeing repentance in one of His erring children and lifting the discipline (chastening) He may have placed on him. It follows restorative forgiveness, which has to do with the erring person being restored in his soul to communion with God through the confession of his sins (1 John 1:9). Administrative forgiveness has to do with the elders (acting in conjunction with the assembly) administrating forgiveness to a repentant believer (John 20:23). It may also be in connection with a person's restoration to the fellowship of the saints, if he had been put way from the Lord's Table (2 Cor. 2:10).

It is noteworthy that there are two different words used here in the original language that are translated "sick." The first occurrence (vs. 14) has to do with sickness in the body, but the second occurrence has to do with distress and oppression of the mind (vs. 15). The second use of the word is only used in one other place in Scripture, where it says, "Wearied and faint in your minds" (Heb. 12:3). This indicates a mental distress. Our point in mentioning this is that whether the difficulty is physical or mental, the Lord can use the prayer of faith of the elders to lift it.

This passage shows that physical illness or mental distresses can be connected with a person's low spiritual state. As noted, the context of this passage in James has to do with healing sickness due to sin in one's life. However, the fact that it says, "If he have committed sins...." shows that not all sickness is a result of God's governmental judgment on account of a course of sin in a person's life. In this regard, Mr. Darby wrote, "It would, however, be untrue to suppose that all afflictions are such. Though they are so sometimes, they are not always sent because of sin." Hence, the elders may be called to pray over a person when there is no specific sin involved. However, from 1 John 5:16 we learn that the elders need to have spiritual discernment as to whether they should pray for the individual in this way. It says, "There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it." This means that in some cases, if the elders discern that it is a sickness "unto death," they may not feel free to pray for healing.

Further to this, it should be pointed out that the sick person is to "call" for the elders. The elders should not interfere with what God is doing in a person's life and volunteer to come and pray for them. God will honour the faith of the sick person in calling for the elders, even if the call is feeble.

Vs. 16a—James goes on to show that it's possible that the healing, which the elders have been called to pray for, could be hindered. If the person has outstanding offences toward others that he has not settled, or he holds a grudge against someone, or he will not forgive a person for some reason, he needs to address these things first (Matt. 5:23-24; Mark 11:24-26). James says, "Confess therefore your offences to one another, and pray for one another, that ye may be healed." The use of the words, "therefore" and "that" show that clearing these things up is connected with the healing process. Hence, the confession that James is referring to here is that which the person desiring to be healed needs to make to whoever he or she has offended, so that there would be nothing on their part that would hinder the healing process.

In Christianity, there should be an openness and a transparency among brethren. If we have offended someone—and we "often" do (chap. 3:2)—we should want to make things right by confessing our offence to the one whom we have offended. And thus, God would be happy to answer our prayers regarding our physical healing. James is not encouraging the saints to randomly disclose their sins to one another which they have committed before they were saved—which have been judged and washed away in the blood of Christ. This would be a pointless exercise, and in many cases, quite defiling. The confession that James is referring to here is regarding an offence that the person seeking healing may be guilty of, and perhaps has caused a breach of fellowship between brethren. His point is that we cannot expect to be healed of a physical malady, by having the elders pray for us, if we have some matter that is unsettled with a brother or a sister.

Elijah's Prayers

Vss. 16b-18—James goes on to give us some encouraging words in connection with the power of prayer. He says, "The fervent supplication of a righteous man has much power." To illustrate the power in prayer, he directs us to two prayers of Elijah (1 Kings 17-18). In order to negate any thought in our minds that this man was some super-believer whose prayer life we could never match, James reminds us that he was a man "subject to like passions as we are." Elijah had his failures, but God still answered his prayers in a remarkable way. They were answered according to the goodness in the heart of God, not according to Elijah's faithfulness. This should encourage us to pray.

In connection with Elijah's first prayer—"that it might not rain"—we must not look at it for its imprecatory qualities, but for its example of praying intelligently and in the current of the mind of God. He knew from the Scriptures that if the people departed from God, God would chasten them by withholding rain (Lev. 26:1-20; Deut. 11:17). Since the northern kingdom of Israel (the ten tribes) had turned away from Jehovah and had adopted Baal-worship as their religion, Elijah knew what was coming and prayed in concert with the ways of God in the matter. It is not for us in this Christian economy to pray against people in an imprecatory way—that is, to invoke curses and judgments on them. Elijah is not an example for us in this.

Elijah's second prayer on Mount Carmel is recorded in 1 Kings 18:41-45. It is in connection with the restoration of the backsliding nation of Israel to Jehovah and their consequent blessing. Three and a half years after the first prayer, Elijah "prayed again, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit" (vs. 18). This is something that we surely want to emulate in our prayers. We should desire the good and blessing of all men, and should pray to that end. This is what Elijah did.

James does not mention the earnestness with which Elijah prayed on that occasion. But in turning to the account in 1 Kings 18, we see many significant elements of fervent prayer by this righteous man—all of which we need to have in our prayers.

Elements of Elijah's Prayer on Carmel

Intelligence—He said, "There is a sound of abundance of rain" (vs. 41). The people had turned back to the Lord, and as a result, Elijah knew that God's will would be to open the heavens and send rain, because God always rewards obedience (Deut. 11:13-15; 1 John 5:14 –"according to His will").

Communion—"Elijah went up the top of Carmel." This implies nearness to God (vs. 42a; John 15:7 – "If ye abide in Me...").

Humility—He "cast himself down upon the earth" (vs. 42b).

Dependence—He "put his face between his knees" (vs. 42c).

Faith—He said, "Go up now, look toward the sea" (vs. 43a; Col. 4:2; Eph. 6:18 – "watching thereunto").

Perseverance—He said, "Go again seven times" (vs. 43b; Eph. 6:18 – "with all perseverance").

Confidence—He said, "Go up, say unto Ahab, Prepare thy chariot" (vs. 44; 1 John 3:21-22 – "We have confidence toward God").

Restoring a Wayward Brother

Vss. 19-20—The subject throughout this whole passage has been in connection with restoring individuals who have gotten off the path. We have seen the elders of the assembly praying in regard to the restoration of a believer who has been sick on account of God's chastening hand being laid upon him. We have also looked at Elijah as illustrating the need for praying in communion with the mind of God in connection with backslidden persons. But now in these last two verses of the chapter, we have the exercise of brethren to go after a wayward believer and bring him back.

In the case of the person who has been sick, God has used his sickness to turn him back to the Lord. In turning to the elders, he is calling for help. Hence, repentance has been going on in the individual. But in the situation that we are about to consider, the person is not calling for help. Hence, the work of repentance has not begun in his soul yet. This latter case, therefore, is far more difficult. Even though it is a monumental task, James places the onus on his brethren to go and bring him back. How are they to accomplish this? In order for one to turn back to the Lord, there must be repentance—a change of mind and a passing of judgment on all that has been done wrong. Therefore, those who seek to restore the wayward brother must minister to him in such a way that his heart and conscience are reached.

Also, it should be noted that those who are to do this restorative work are not necessarily the elders in the assembly. James simply says, "And one convert him [bring him back]." This "one" could be any brother or sister who has the wayward person on their heart. We are all our "brother's keeper" (Gen. 4:9), and we should all care enough to go after him. Abram went after Lot and brought him back (Gen. 14:14-16). The Apostle Paul touches on this needed ministry in Galatians 6:1: "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted." Note: this does not require a special gift. The only thing that is needed is spirituality and a genuine care for the person who has erred. This will lead us, not only to pray for him, but also to go after him and bring him back, if possible.

James seeks to encourage us in this work, saying, "Let him know, that he which converteth [brings back] the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins." This is not written to the erring brother, but to those who care for him. It shows that labouring to restore souls is a rewarding work. God grants joy and a special sense of His approval to the one who goes after a wayward brother or sister. Saving the person "from the error of his way" refers to him being prevented, through repentance, from going deeper into sin, and thus feeling the governmental consequences of it. The chastening of God will follow an erring believer—even to shortening his life on earth through "death." Many wayward children of God have died prematurely under the chastening hand of God because of their unwillingness to judge the course of sin that they were on. Ecclesiastes warns, "Be not over much wicked, neither be thou foolish: why shouldest thou die before thy time?" (Eccl. 7:17).

The one who seeks to restore the erring brother may learn of sins in the person's life, but "love shall cover the multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8) and not broadcast those things before the world and further muddy the Christian testimony. Love covers that which has been judged and put away.

This work of seeking the welfare and restoration of others is another evidence of a person having faith. If we truly believe on the Lord Jesus, we will love others who believe on Him, and if one such believer errs in the path, love in us will seek to restore him (1 John 5:1). Divine love in a believer will seek to lead the erring person to repentance so that he judges himself and returns to the Lord. If a person is not a true believer, but a mere professor, he will not be concerned for a wayward person, and thus manifests evidence that he is not truly a believer.

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In summary, we have seen James challenging those who have faith to exhibit it in various ways in the everyday situations of life so that it is clear to all that they are true believers on the Lord Jesus Christ.

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