

INTRODUCTION AND JAMES

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Introduction	2
I. Author.....	2
II. Addressees.....	4
III. Date.....	6
IV. Structure.....	6
Text	8
I. Greeting (1:1).....	8
II. Encouragement and Instruction for Trials (1:2 - 2:13)	8
A. Encouragement to endure oppression by rich (1:2-12).....	8
1. maturing effect of trials (1:2-4)	9
2. availability of needed wisdom (1:5-8).....	9
3. contrasting positions and fates (1:9-12).....	11
B. Warning against slandering God during trials (1:13-18)	12
1. do not ascribe evil intent to God (1:13-15).....	12
2. God seeks only our good (1:16-18)	14
C. Call to be doers of the word during trials (1:19 – 2:13).....	15
1. With regard to hostility toward oppressors (1:19-27).....	15
a. anger toward oppressors (1:19-25)	15
b. evil speech toward oppressors (1:26-27).....	17
2. with regard to preference toward rich (2:1-13)	18
a. problem identified (2:1-4)	18
b. foolishness of favoring the rich (2:5-7).....	18
c. seriousness of the sin (2:8-13)	20
III. Defense of call to works in light of error (2:14-26)	22
A. Error of "faith only" shown from everyday example (2:14-17).....	22
B. Error of "faith only" shown from fate of demons (2:18-19)	22
C. Error of "faith only" shown from Scripture (2:20-26)	23
IV. Caution about role of teacher in light of error (3:1-5a).....	26
A. Stricter judgment and potential for error (3:1-2).....	26
B. Great effect of teaching on church (3:3-5a)	27
V. Call to harmony among believers (3:5b - 4:12)	28
A. Cursing (3:5b-12)	28
B. Envy and rivalry (3:13-18).....	31
C. Conflicts and quarrels (4:1-3).....	32
D. Call to submit to God (4:4-10)	33
E. Command not to slander (4:11-12)	35
VI. Criticism of the wealthy (4:13 - 5:6).....	35
A. Rebuke of believers neglecting poor believers (4:13-17)	35

B. Fate of unbelievers oppressing poor believers (5:1-6).....	37
VII. Encouragement to stand firm during oppression by rich (5:7-11).....	38
VIII. Concluding remarks (5:12-20)	41
A. Instruction not to swear (5:12)	41
B. Instruction re suffering, cheer, and illness (5:13-18).....	43
C. Encouragement to correct the erring (5:19-20)	46

Introduction

I. Author

A. It was written by "James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1). This minimal identification suggests it was a James who was so well known in the Christian community that he did not need to say anything else in order to be recognized. That right away points to James the Lord's brother, as he was the most prominent James in the early church (see, Gal. 1:19, 2:9; Acts 12:17, 15:13, 21:18).

1. The Lord's brother James was a respected and beloved figure in the early church, especially among Jewish Christians. He was called the "righteous" or the "just" because of his character and his devotion to prayer. He was not a disciple during Jesus' earthly ministry (Jn. 7:5), and we are not told specifically of his conversion, but certainly his life was affected dramatically when the resurrected Jesus appeared to him as Paul reports in 1 Cor. 15:7.

2. Hegesippus, an early second-century Jewish Christian from Jerusalem, describes James's death in his *Memoirs* (which have survived only in fragments quoted by other authors, mainly Eusebius). He claims that James was stoned to death by the scribes and Pharisees for refusing to renounce his commitment to Jesus (Eusebius, *History of the Church* 2.23). The Jewish historian Josephus confirms the essentials of this story and enables us to date the incident to A.D. 62 (*Antiquities* 20.200-201).

B. James, the son of Zebedee, would have had been well known as one of the twelve apostles, but he did not have the prominence of the Lord's brother. Moreover, he was put to death by Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:2) around A.D. 44, which is probably just a little too early for him to qualify as the author of this letter. But even if the date of his death does not disqualify him as the author, there are other indicators that clearly favor the Lord's brother James as the author.

C. Before looking at those other indicators, you may be interested to know that the Hebrew name of the New Testament author we know as James (and other men in the New Testament we know as James) was the same Hebrew name as other men in Scripture we know as

Jacob. Here's a quick summary of how that same Hebrew name came to be rendered differently in English.

1. The Hebrew name of the Jewish patriarch, Isaac's son, is יַעֲקֹב (Ya'qob). That name was transliterated (sounds are replicated in a different alphabet) in the LXX as Ἰακώβ.

2. Ἰακώβ, however, did not sound like a normal Greek name, which commonly ended with an ος (omicron sigma). So if one wanted to Hellenize the name, make it sound like a more normal Greek name, one would use Ἰάκωβος rather than the strict transliteration Ἰακώβ. But both are Greek representations of the same Hebrew name.

3. The New Testament writers kept the transliterated form Ἰακώβ when referring to prior generations, when referring to the patriarch and to the father of Mary's husband Joseph, but they used the Hellenized form when referring to the New Testament generation. That is the Greek name by which that generation would have been known.

4. When Jerome translated the Bible into Latin in the fourth century, what is known as the Vulgate, he preserved the New Testament writers' generational distinction in representing the same Hebrew name: *Iacob* and *Iacobus*. In the fourteenth century, John Wycliffe prepared the first English translation of the complete Bible by translating the Vulgate. He turned the generational distinction in representing the same Hebrew name into two distinct names, rendering *Iacob* as Jacob and *Iacobus* as James.

5. That choice was followed in the subsequent English translations and long ago became entrenched tradition. So as Luke Timothy Johnson points out in *The Letter of James* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 93, "This letter from 'James,' therefore, is in reality a letter from 'Jacob.'"

6. The author of this letter, the Lord's brother, was no doubt named after Joseph's father, whose name is given in Mat. 1:16 as Jacob in English translations. But since we all know the Lord's brother (and others in the New Testament with his same Hebrew name) as James, that is how I will refer to him.

D. As I will explain in a minute, I understand the Letter of James to be a pastoral letter written to Jewish Christians who, having scattered from Israel (e.g., Acts 11:19), were facing economic distress, including persecution at the hands of wealthy landowners (see, II below). If that is correct, the fact the Lord's brother was a leader in the early Jerusalem church who ministered mainly to Jewish Christians makes him the most likely James to write such a letter.

E. That James the Lord's brother is the author is further supported by similarities between the Letter of James and words attributed to James the Lord's brother in Acts 15. For example:

1. The word *charein* ("greetings") is used in the greeting of Jas. 1:1 and in Acts 15:23 in the greeting of the letter sent by James to the Gentiles. The only other time it is used that way in the New Testament is in the letter from commander Claudius Lysias to Governor Felix in Acts 23:26.

2. The noun "name" (*onoma*) is the subject of the passive form of the verb *epikaleo* ("call" or "invoke") in Jas. 2:7 (name that was invoked/called over/upon you). The only other time that occurs in the New Testament is in Acts 15:17 (over/upon whom my name was invoked/called) in the speech delivered by James.

3. The appeal "listen, my brothers" occurs in Jas. 2:5 and in Acts 15:13 at the beginning of the speech delivered by James.

F. According to Eusebius, who wrote a history of the church in the early fourth century, the letter generally was attributed to James the Lord's brother. D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo state in *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 626: "We conclude then that James the brother of the Lord is the author of the letter. This is the natural implication of the letter's own claims, it is corroborated by the New Testament and early Christian evidence, and it has no decisive argument against it."

II. Addressees

A. Most scholars agree the letter was written to Jewish Christians. This is suggested by:

1. James assumes familiarity with and acceptance of the Old Testament (2:8-11, 2:21-25, 4:5-6, 4:12, 5:10, 5:17-18).

2. He refers to their meeting place as a "synagogue" (2:2), terminology that would resonate particularly with Jews.

3. He addresses them as "adulteresses" (4:4), which assumes familiarity with the Old Testament tradition likening the Lord's covenant with his people to a marriage relationship.

4. He cites the standard Jewish confession of the oneness of God (part of the *Shema*) taken from Deut. 6:4 (2:19).

5. He addresses them as "the twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (1:1).

a. "Twelve tribes" was used by Jews to describe the regathered people of the last days, the true people of God. For James, this surely meant Christians, the end-time Israel regathered in the form of twelve "apostolic tribes," the faith descendants of the twelve Jewish apostles.

b. The reference to them as "in the Dispersion" probably is another indication of their Jewish ethnicity. "Dispersion" (*diaspora*) normally was used to denote Jews living outside of Israel (see Jn. 7:35). The word could be used figuratively for Christians in general (those who live away from their heavenly "homeland" – see, 1 Pet. 1:1), but as Douglas Moo notes (p. 50), "the early date and Jewish audience of James suggest a more literal meaning of the term here."

c. Thus, Peter Davids states in *Commentary on James*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 64, "[A]ccepting as we do the Jewish Christian origin of this epistle, the most natural way of reading this phrase [in the Dispersion] is as an address to the true Israel (i.e. Jewish Christians) outside of Palestine (i.e. probably in Syria and Asia Minor)." Craig Blomberg and Mariam Kamell likewise state in *James*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 48, "'the twelve tribes of the dispersion' most likely refer to a collection of Jewish-Christian congregations somewhere outside Israel toward the eastern end of the Mediterranean basin, perhaps in Syria."

B. Most of the addressees were poor and were being oppressed by their unbelieving rich neighbors (1:2-3, 1:9-12, 2:5-7, 2:15, 5:1-11).

1. They perhaps had been scattered from Jerusalem and its confines by persecution such as that described in Acts 11:19: "Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews." They were trying to establish new lives in new and often hostile environments. Andreas Kostenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles Quarles state in *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 713:

Given the likely date of the letter, there does seem to be a specific group and occasion that would fit the letter's contents. After the stoning of Stephen, the Jerusalem believers (quite a large number by this time) were scattered outside Jerusalem. The injunctions in the letter seem appropriate for both wealthy and poor, and in particular portray wealthy landowners oppressing poor laborers. Those displaced by persecution would certainly find themselves working essentially as migrant workers (though some might flourish).

2. As Douglas Moo notes in *The Letter of James*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 10, "The middle first century in the Middle East was marred by famine and general economic distress as well as by a tendency for wealthy people to buy up land and force farmers to work their land on their own terms (cf. Jas. 5:1-6)."

C. The original readers were experiencing ethical problems in the form of anger, evil speech, favoritism, and various sins of division. It is likely these various sins were related to their oppression (note 5:9) and dislocation.

III. Date

A. The letter must have been written after James became a prominent leader of the Jerusalem church, so after around A.D. 42 (see Acts 12:17). And since he was executed in A.D. 62, it obviously was written before that. That range reasonably can be narrowed by certain historical circumstances.

B. The error of "faith only" salvation that James addresses in 2:14-26 was probably a misrepresentation of Paul's teaching that had been circulated by his opponents. This requires a date late enough for this distortion of Paul's teaching to have reached Jerusalem but early enough that Paul and James had not met to clarify that teaching (they probably had such an opportunity during the famine visit in A.D. 46/47 - Acts 11:30).

C. The absence of any reference to the controversy between Jews and Gentiles with regard to the Mosaic Law suggests a date prior to A.D. 48/49. That is when this issue forcibly surfaced in the early church (Jerusalem Council was A.D. 49).

D. A date of around A.D. 45 best fits all the evidence. Paul began preaching in Syrian Antioch (Acts 11:25-26) around A.D. 43. Jewish Christians "scattered" by the persecution following Stephen's death had traveled to Antioch and other places around Israel (Acts 11:19). Some of them probably misunderstood Paul's teaching and transmitted that misunderstanding to the church in Jerusalem. James writes this letter to minister to his scattered flock.

E. If that is correct, this is the earliest of the New Testament writings. Craig Blomberg and Mariam Kamell conclude (p. 35):

With this short letter, therefore, we have what is probably the first NT document written and the first existing Christian writing of any kind of which we know. James, the (half-)brother of the Lord Jesus and chief elder in Jerusalem during the first generation of Christianity (or at least from about A.D. 44-62), is writing to a group of primarily Jewish-Christian congregations, most likely in the mid-to-late forties, and probably somewhere in or around Syria. We have no indication of where James himself resided at this time, but Jerusalem is obviously the best guess.

IV. Structure

A. Martin Luther wrote that James "throws things together chaotically," and many scholars throughout history have echoed that opinion. They were, and many still are, convinced that the Epistle of James is a hodgepodge of loosely connected discourses on diverse subjects, a literary mosaic that lacks the continuity of thought necessary to qualify as a true epistle. For

example, James Thompson states in Paul J. Achtemeier, ed., *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 447:

It is composed primarily of self-contained sections that appear to be connected only loosely by catchwords (e.g., 1:4-5). Little sequence or development can be detected, as the author speaks authoritatively on a variety of subjects. The "epistle" is similar in form to such Jewish documents as Proverbs, Ecclesiasticus, and *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*.

B. Today most scholars grant that there is a broad or general coherence of thought in the letter – such as it having a prescript (1:1), an introduction (1:2-27), and a main body (2:1-5:20) – but no attempt to provide a more detailed flow of thought within and across those boundaries has gained widespread support. The continuing disagreement over more refined outlines or structural proposals is taken by some as proof the letter lacks any such detailed structure.

C. With that caution duly noted, I must say I disagree with it. I am convinced there is a logical movement or flow of thought throughout the letter. My understanding, which I published in an academic journal (*Restoration Quarterly*) in 1994 under the title "Another View on the Structure of James," is that James is a genuine and coherent pastoral letter that was written to strengthen and instruct impoverished Christians who were being oppressed by their rich neighbors. As Donald Guthrie concludes in *New Testament Introduction*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 748:

It would seem from this epistle that the believers were mainly poor. The allusions to the rich are more intelligible if these were unbelievers who were on the fringe of the church and were taking advantage of their wealth and influence to intimidate the poor Christians. At the same time rich men must at times have attended the Christian synagogues, otherwise the discussion in chapter 2 would not be relevant.

D. I will unfold this structure or movement of thought as we work through the text. I think it significantly illuminates the meaning of James's words, but you will need to decide whether the outline represents James's thought or is something imposed on the text. If you would like to see a fuller defense of my proposed structure, the paper I mentioned is available on my website: theoutlet.us. It is in the list of articles that appears when you click the "Bible Studies" tab. What I am passing out now is simply the bare outline of how I see the letter's structure. You might want to hold onto it throughout the study as it will help you to know where we are in the larger picture.

Text

I. Greeting (1:1)

James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: greetings.

A. James implicitly confesses the deity of Jesus by announcing his slavery to both God and Jesus and by employing the terms "Lord" and "Christ" in reference to Jesus.

1. To be a slave of someone was to be their property, to be subject to their control and direction. In so describing himself, James is acknowledging his subservient status, but he also is claiming the honor and authority of being a "slave *of God*," a slave of the sovereign of the universe.

2. In the Old Testament, the title "slave (singular) of Yahweh" was used of those who came to enjoy an especially honored relationship with God, great leaders of the people of Israel, such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and Job. So, in addition to acknowledging his subservience to God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, James was suggesting his authority to address – and admonish – the readers.

B. The amazing thing is that Jesus was his half-brother! We know that at one point Jesus' brothers did not believe him (Jn. 7:3-5); they even thought he was out of his mind (Mk. 3:20-21, 31). What happened to create this faith? As I said, we are not told specifically, but Paul tells us in 1 Cor. 15:7 that the resurrected Jesus appeared to his brother James! That certainly would turn a person around.

C. According to Josephus, in A.D. 62 Jesus' brother James was put to death at the instigation of the Jewish high priest (Ananus) for supposedly having transgressed the law, charges that Hegesippus (as reported by Eusebius) makes clear were related to his faith in Christ.

II. Encouragement and Instruction for Trials (1:2 - 2:13)

A. Encouragement to endure oppression by rich (1:2-12)

1. maturing effect of trials (1:2-4)

²Consider it all joy, my brothers, whenever you fall into various kinds of trials, ³knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. ⁴And let endurance complete its work so that you may be complete and whole, lacking in nothing.

a. The oppression they were undergoing at the hands of rich oppressors was a *faith test* because it was religiously motivated (2:6-7) and/or was perceived by them as a sign of divine disfavor with their faith. It was difficulty that put pressure on their faith in Christ, something they perceived could be relieved or lessened by unfaithfulness.

b. James encourages them to endure the trials by reminding them of the spiritual benefits that accompany them; they are a kind of "spiritual aerobics." Though they are difficult to undergo, they produce something of greater value than the pain they cause. Specifically, they produce or develop the quality or characteristic of endurance (perseverance, patience, steadfastness), the capacity to keep on keeping on, to continue resolutely in faithfulness through suffering and pressure to quit. And if allowed to complete its work, this endurance, this increased capacity or strength to stand that emerges from the fire of testing, will bring the disciple to full spiritual maturity.

c. From that perspective, faith tests are grounds for rejoicing because they are an opportunity for spiritual strengthening and growth. I think of the apostles at the end of Acts 5 rejoicing after having been beaten for preaching Christ. They rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus (v. 41). Their suffering for the faith was viewed in a larger context that transformed it into a ground of rejoicing.

d. This idea is expressed elsewhere in the New Testament. For example, in Heb. 12:7-11 the writer says the mistreatment his readers were facing because of their allegiance to Christ was divine discipline, something God was allowing in order ultimately to bless his children (see also, Rom. 5:2b-5 and 1 Pet. 1:6-7). It is not pleasant at the time, but it produces something of great value.

2. availability of needed wisdom (1:5-8)

⁵But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all without reservation and without reprimanding, and it will be given to him. ⁶But let him ask in faith, doubting nothing, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord, ⁸[being] a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

a. Trials magnify one's need for wisdom. The pain makes it easy to be deceived about the course one should take. Under the pressure of hardship, the sinful path that takes one away from rather than through the trial can seem very attractive, and all sorts of rationalizations can be whipped up to justify unfaithfulness. In addition, one needs wisdom to recognize and appreciate that God is in fact working through the trials. As Ralph Martin notes in *James*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), 17, "The readers are facing some real problems arising from persecution, and it is the gift and application of wisdom to see these trials in their proper light and respond accordingly."

b. James encourages his readers to endure their trials by promising them that the wisdom needed during such times is available from God for the asking. God not only gives without reservation (or generously), he also gives without scolding us for not already having the wisdom we need. So there should be no hesitation in asking for wisdom.

c. With wisdom, they will be able to see sin for what it is, to penetrate the fog of rationalization, and thus be able to discern the right course to take. They also will be able to grasp through the pain that God is working in their trials for their benefit. He has not turned on them or abandoned them.

d. James cautions, however, that such asking must be done in faith. The one who "doubts" will not receive anything.

(1) The word translated "doubting/doubts" (*diakrinō*) means (in the middle voice) "dispute with oneself." Moo says (p. 60), "[A]s the word's basic meaning suggests, James is probably thinking of a strong kind of doubting: a basic division within the believer that brings about wavering and inconsistency of attitude toward God." In other words, James probably is not saying that a prayer request (for wisdom or anything else) will be granted only for one who is absolutely certain it will be granted, only for one who harbors zero doubt about God's will in that specific instance. He is saying it won't be granted to one who is divided in his allegiance to God, to one who is a spiritual schizophrenic.

(2) This is confirmed in vv. 6b-8, where the doubter is portrayed as a wave driven and tossed by the wind and is labeled a "double-minded man" who is unstable in all he does.

(a) The image of a wave blown about is taken from Jewish tradition (e.g., Philo). As Moo remarks (p. 61), "The picture here is not of a wave mounting in height and crashing to shore, but of the swell of the sea, never having the same texture and shape from moment to moment, but always changing with the variations in wind direction and strength."

(b) The word translated "double-minded" (*dipsychos*) literally is "double-souled." This is the first known occurrence of this word in Greek literature.

James, who uses the same word in 4:8, may have coined it. It refers to one who has a divided heart, who does not display a wholehearted and consistent faith commitment to God.

(c) This person is not marked by occasional doubt or lapse but is unstable in all he does. He suffers from a basic inconsistency in attitude and spirit. Peter Davids summarizes the description this way (p. 75):

The author, then, concludes his description of the doubter with a strong condemnation: his divided mind, when it comes to trusting God, indicates a basic disloyalty toward God. Rather than being a single-minded lover of God, he is one whose character and conduct is unstable, even hypocritical. No wonder he should expect nothing from God! He is not in the posture of a trusting child at all.

3. contrasting positions and fates (1:9-12)

⁹Let the lowly brother boast in his high position, ¹⁰but the rich man in his humiliation, for he will pass away like a flower of the grass. ¹¹For the sun rose with the searing heat and dried the grass, and its flower fell and the beauty of its appearance perished; so also the rich man will wither away in his pursuits. ¹²Blessed is the man who endures a trial, for having been proven, he will receive the crown of life which [God] has promised to those who love him.

a. James encourages his readers in their trials by contrasting their exalted position and glorious future in Christ with the low position and bleak future of their oppressors. However difficult the Christian's life in this world, he can always "boast" or "take pride in" the high position to which he's been exalted by God through Christ. (It is fine to boast in God's work.) The rich unbeliever, on the other hand, has nothing to "boast" about except the low position he has in the eyes of God. This obviously is irony. Since the rich man so loves to boast, let him boast in the fact he is out of God's favor.

b. There is a scholarly disagreement over whether the rich man here is a believer or an unbeliever. I side with commentators like Peter Davids, Sophie Laws, Ralph Martin, Robert Wall, and Scot McKnight in identifying the rich man as an unbeliever.

c. I think it is a mistake to separate v. 12 from vv. 9-11 and begin a new paragraph with v. 12 as is done in many English translations (e.g., ESV, NIV). Structurally, James mentions the status of the lowly brother (v. 9 – exaltation), the status of the rich man (v. 10 – humiliation), the fate of the rich man (vv. 10b-11 – pass away and fade away), and the fate of the lowly brother (v. 12 – will receive the crown of life). Verse 12 is the parallel to the fate of the rich unbeliever.

d. The hope of eschatological reversal is a common method of encouraging those undergoing persecution (e.g., Jas. 5:1-6; Phil. 1:28-29; 2 Thess. 1:3-10; Revelation 18-22). However difficult things may be in this life, ultimately the faithful will be blessed and God's enemies will be judged. See, 2 Thess. 1:6-10; note Paul's perspective on hardships in 2 Cor. 4:16-18.

B. Warning against slandering God during trials (1:13-18)

1. do not ascribe evil intent to God (1:13-15)

¹³Let no one being tested say, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted by evil, and he himself tempts no one. ¹⁴Rather, each man is tempted by being dragged away and enticed by his own desires. ¹⁵Then the desire, after conceiving, gives birth to sin; and sin, when fully grown, brings forth death.

a. In the midst of persecution (or other trials), one can feel that God has become an enemy, that he is trying to drive one away from him by driving one to sin. So James warns his audience not to slander God in the midst of their trials by claiming that God is against them, that he is trying to induce them sin. He warns those "being *tested*" or "undergoing trials" not to say they are "being *tempted*" by God. The Greek word *peirazō* has both the good sense of "testing" and the bad sense of "tempting," and that distinction must be recognized here.

b. The cross of Christ forever makes clear that God is for us. God tests his children, but he never tempts them. The distinction is one of motivation. God permits hardships in the life of a believer, but he never does so with hostile motives; he never does so for the purpose of leading them into evil. He allows us to carry a weight to strengthen us, not to cause us to sin. As Moo states (p. 73), "[W]hile God may test or prove his servants in order to strengthen their faith, he never seeks to induce sin and destroy their faith."

c. If they sin, it is not because God willed it. Rather, it is because they failed to control their own desires.

(1) It is a mistake in my judgment to restrict the origin of temptation to *evil* desire, to an illicit desire to do something wrong, as a number of translations do (evil desire, wrong desire, lust). Though the Greek word *epithumia* often in the New Testament carries the narrower sense of an illicit or wrong desire, a desire to sin, it can refer to desire generally, and I think here that broader sense, a sense that includes morally neutral desires, needs to be maintained. Morally neutral desires are not wrong in themselves, but they still can generate temptation to sin. For example, the desire for food is a proper desire that serves to keep one alive and healthy, but that desire can tempt one to steal. Attraction to the opposite sex is a

proper desire that pulls one toward marriage and procreation, but that desire can tempt one to lust or to engage in sexual immorality.

(2) This is the sense in which I understand Jesus' being tempted in every way in Heb. 4:15. He was tempted to do wrong by the normal and proper desires of his humanness – not from an evil desire, a desire for sin – but he never succumbed to any of those temptations. God the Father, on the other hand, cannot be tempted (v. 13b), the difference presumably lying in the mystery of the incarnation. Jesus, the God-man, has two natures that though separate are united in one person. His temptation involved his human nature.

(3) And since I brought up Heb. 4:15, it should be noted it means that Jesus was tempted in every *category* of sin not that he experienced every specific temptation to sin known to man. For example, the fact he experienced sexual temptation need not mean he experienced temptation toward incest, bestiality, or other depraved forms of sexual misconduct.

d. But James is not concerned with those issues. His point is that, if uncontrolled, our desire will lead us beyond temptation into actual sin and that the responsibility for that sin rests squarely on our shoulders. As Paul says in 1 Cor. 10:13b, "But God is faithful; he will not allow you to be tested beyond what you are able [to bear], but with the testing, he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure." We cannot excuse our sin by blaming God or our circumstances, however sorely we have been tested.

e. James warns them in v. 15b that this is serious business, that there is grave danger in yielding to temptation. He says that sinning is the first step on a road that leads to death. If sin is unchecked, if it is allowed to become "fully grown," allowed to realize its designs on one's life, it will result in death. One will be cut off from the life of God, alienated from him, which ultimately will result in one's condemnation at the final judgment. When we sin, we must repent so that sin does not become "fully grown" (the master of our lives). A life of sin, as opposed to a life of faith, will result in judgment (death).

(1) The link between sin and death is well known in the New Testament. See, e.g., Jn. 8:21; Rom. 5:12, 21, 6:23, 7:7-12; 1 Cor. 15:56. (The Greek word for "death" in Jas. 1:15b – *thanatos* – is used in each of these verses except Jn. 8:21; see also, Jas. 5:19-20.) In Rom. 8:12-14 Paul warned the Roman Christians that they would die in the full theological sense if they fell back into a lifestyle of the flesh (living like a non-Christian). He made the same point to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 6:9-10, 10:1-13), the Galatians (Gal. 5:19-21, 6:7-8), the Ephesians (Eph. 5:3-7), and the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 4:3-8).

(2) As Peter expressed it in 2 Pet. 2:17-22:

¹⁷These men are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm, for whom the deepest darkness of the underworld has been reserved. ¹⁸For while uttering high-sounding nonsense, they entice with licentious acts and lusts of the flesh those who are just escaping from those who live in error, ¹⁹promising them freedom while

themselves being slaves of depravity - for a man has become a slave to whatever has overcome him. ²⁰For if, after escaping from the pollutions of the world by the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they have been overcome by again becoming entangled in these things, their last state has become worse to them than the first. ²¹For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn from the holy commandment that was passed on to them. ²²It has happened to them according to the true proverb: "A dog returns to its vomit," and "a washed sow returns to wallowing in the mud."

2. God seeks only our good (1:16-18)

¹⁶Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. ¹⁷Every good act of giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is neither change nor a shifting shadow. ¹⁸Having willed, he brought us into being by the word of truth, so that we might be a kind of firstfruits of his creation.

a. James urges them not to allow the pain of their trials to deceive them about God's commitment to their welfare (as 1:13 suggests was a danger). God is not an adversary. He seeks only to bless them, as evidenced by the fact he ("Father of lights" speaks of his good creation) is the source of every good act of giving and of every perfect gift. God is their supreme benefactor, and his commitment to their welfare is unchanging because he himself is unchanging.

b. The word κτίσμα in v. 18b means that which is created (by God), and here I think it refers generally to animate and inanimate creation, which is why I render it "creation" instead of "creatures." This is the meaning given for the word in this verse in Danker's *Greek New Testament Lexicon*, it is how it is rendered in NJB, and it is the equivalent of NET's and NIV's "all he created."

c. The ultimate expression of God's good giving is his giving them (these Christians) new birth through the gospel, the word of truth. And in their new birth, this first generation of Christians is a promise not only of a harvest of more converts but a harvest that ultimately will involve all of creation. God is reaping a harvest from all that he fashioned. Like Paul in Romans 8, James alludes to a tie between Christians and the redemption of creation.

d. Moo comments (p. 80), "God's grace has been extended through the gospel to people so as to bring into existence a foretaste, or down payment ("firstfruits"), of a redemptive plan that will eventually encompass all of creation." Davids states (p. 90), "They have been reborn by the word of truth, the gospel. . . . But redemption does not stop here, for the full harvest will follow the firstfruits and the consummation will include the whole creation." Kurt Richardson states in *James*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1997), 87, "those saved

out of lost humanity will be a firstfruits of God's saving work that reaches every component of creation." The note in the *NIV Zondervan Study Bible* says, "The spiritual birth of believers is the first stage in God's cosmic plan to remake the entire universe."

C. Call to be doers of the word during trials (1:19 – 2:13)

1. With regard to hostility toward oppressors (1:19-27)

a. anger toward oppressors (1:19-25)

¹⁹You know this, my beloved brothers, but let every man be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger; ²⁰for a man's anger does not produce the righteousness of God. ²¹Therefore, having put away all moral filth and abundance of evil, accept with humility the implanted word that is able to save your souls. ²²And be doers of the word, not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. ²³Because if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror; ²⁴for he noticed himself and went away and immediately forgot what he was like. ²⁵But the man who looked into the perfect law, the law of freedom, and remained, not being a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in his doing.

(1) James's readers knew they were to be Christ-like in their handling of conflicts. They knew the proverbial statement (v. 19) that was intended to keep one's emotions in check, to keep one from crossing over into sinful anger, but they needed to be called back to it because some were failing in that regard by becoming sinfully angry in their conflict with the rich oppressors.

(2) James commands them to live up to what they know, to avoid sinful anger, because sinful anger does not produce, is not conducive to, the righteousness of God. In other words, it is a sinful state of spirit, a sinful disposition or attitude, that does not produce behavior that is pleasing to God. Rather, as Jesus explained in Mat. 5:22, anger is murderous in principle; it is a sense of hostility that finds its ultimate expression in murder. Moo comments (p. 84), "Presumably, [James] is thinking especially of different sinful acts, such as violence, murder (see Matt. 5:21-26 and Jas. 4:2-3), and especially in this context, unwise speech, that stem from anger." In Gal. 5:20, Paul lists anger among the works of the flesh, and in Col. 3:8 he lists it among the things that have no place in the Christian's life.

(3) There is, of course, a form of anger that is not sinful, but James is not focused on that. We know some anger is not sinful because Jesus never sinned (Jn. 8:46; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15, 7:26; 1 Pet. 2:22; 1 Jn. 3:5), and yet Jesus was angry (Mk. 3:5). The

difference is that Jesus' outrage was toward sin (injustice, unbelief, misrepresentation of God, exploitation of others) rather than personal offense; it was what we often call "righteous indignation." Holiness cannot be indifferent toward *sin*. As Robertson McQuilken and Paul Copan state in *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 354, "Indeed, *never* getting angry would be a sign of *apathy*; not getting angry at injustice and cruelty is a vice, not a virtue."

(4) The explanation in 1:20 (note "for") of the proverbial saying in 1:19b ("let every man be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger") makes clear that anger is the focus of James's concern. He does not spell out that the anger in vv. 19-25, the hostile speech in vv. 26-27, and the preference toward the rich in 2:1-13 are oppression related, but that is a reasonable conclusion. As Peter Davids remarks, "On the one hand, the church naturally felt resentment against the rich. . . . On the other hand, if a wealthy person entered the church or was a member, there would be every reason to court him." One would not expect James to refer to his readers' oppression in this context because it does not diminish their personal responsibility for sin (1:14-15) and is therefore irrelevant to his call to repent.

(5) Having repented of all evil when they initially received the gospel, the soul-saving word (taking the aorist participle *apothémenoi* as circumstantial rather than imperatival), they must continue on that path with regard to their anger. They must humbly submit to the ethical demands of that implanted word, submit to the law of freedom that calls them to overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:21; 1 Cor. 4:12-13) and to love their neighbor as themselves.

(a) As Peter Davids observes:

The call to receive the word of the gospel which they have already implanted in them sounds contradictory. But the stock characteristic of the language of receiving the word (meaning accepting and acting on it, as in the examples above) and the fact the gospel consists of both a word about Jesus and ethical content (which is James's main concern: cf. Mussner, 102) point to the sense of "act upon the word you accepted at conversion" (or baptism, if one accepts Mussner's baptismal context).

(b) The "law of freedom" in 1:25 and 2:12 is called the "royal law" in 2:8 and is there identified with "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." This is the command Christ singled out in Mat. 22:34-40 as a summary of interpersonal ethical obligations (see Rom. 13:9-10 and Gal. 5:14).

(6) As kingdom participants, they must be doers of kingdom righteousness, not merely hearers (see, Mat. 7:21; Lk. 6:46-49; Mat. 7:24-27). Those who ignore the ethical demands of the gospel, who hear the word but do not obey it, are deceiving themselves about their relationship with God (1 Jn. 1:3-4). (Here is the first indication of the

distortion of Paul's teaching.) It is of no value to become aware of what you need to do if you promptly forget it (i.e., do not act on it).

(7) God's blessing is on the one who obeys the ethical demands of the gospel, who obeys what Paul in Gal. 6:2 calls the "law of Christ," not because obeying merits God's blessing but because the faith on which God bestows his grace includes a commitment to obey, a surrender to the truth of who God is and what he's done in Christ, and that commitment necessarily finds expression in one's life as empowered by the Holy Spirit.

b. evil speech toward oppressors (1:26-27)

²⁶If anyone considers himself to be religious, while not bridling his own tongue but deceiving his own heart, this one's religion is worthless. ²⁷Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

(1) Their anger against the oppressors was, as often is the case, accompanied by hostile speech. And rather than being convicted of their sin in that regard, they deceived themselves into thinking they were pious despite their sinful speech. They justified their sin in their hearts. James flatly states that this type of religion, one that disassociates faith from life, is worthless.

(2) The addressees apparently magnified the sin of their oppressors, the failure to care for the poor and powerless (epitomized by widows and orphans), while minimizing or ignoring their own contamination by the world in the form of anger and evil speech. This explains James's emphasis on their being doers of the word rather than hearers only (1:22-24) and the references to their self-deception (1:22, 1:26).

(a) Davids states (p. 103), "It is also clear that [orphans and widows] were typical examples . . . for all who suffer distress and oppression." Kurt Richardson states (p. 101), "Orphans and widows are the objects of repeated appeals for righteous action to minister to the needy and helpless. These exemplify the poor to whom God shows special favor (cf. 2:1-7) against the natural human preference for the wealthy."

(b) James bursts their delusion of piety by reminding them that pure and undefiled religion involves not only caring for the poor but *also* keeping oneself unspotted by the world. They needed to confront their own sin rather than hide it in the shadow of the oppressors' sins.

2. with regard to preference toward rich (2:1-13)

a. problem identified (2:1-4)

My brothers, keep the faith of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ without partiality. ²For if a man wearing gold rings and fine clothes comes into your meeting, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in, ³and you look at the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "You sit here in style," and to the poor man you say, "Stand there or sit under my footstool," ⁴have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

(1) Some in James's audience, fearing the power of the wealthy, curried their favor even to the point of showing them preference when they appeared at meetings of the church (as visitors or, perhaps more likely, as new converts). They sought to ingratiate themselves to the wealthy at the expense of the poor. Moo remarks in *The Letter of James*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 87, "Apparently the oppression they were experiencing at the hands of the rich (cf. vss. 6-7) had led . . . to an excessive deference towards the rich and powerful that resulted in a slighting and demeaning of poorer people."

(2) The word translated "partiality" or "favoritism" (*prosōpolēmpsía*) is literally, "receiving the face," which means to make judgments about people based on external appearances. James applies this principle to differences in dress that reflect contrasting social/economic situations.

(3) James commands them to practice their faith without such partiality. To discriminate on the basis of wealth is to judge by an unspiritual criterion, by the evil standards of the world.

(4) We must guard against favoring those who have status in the world's eyes. We must not be more solicitous of the doctor, the business tycoon, the pro athlete, or the celebrity than we are of the common laborer.

b. foolishness of favoring the rich (2:5-7)

⁵Listen, my beloved brothers: did not God choose the poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he promised to those who love him? ⁶But you dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich exploit you? And do they not drag you into courts? ⁷Do they not blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you?

(1) In discriminating against the poor, they were acting contrary to God. He did not discriminate against the poor but chose them to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom, as evidenced by the number of poor believers in their congregation. You see this same concept in 1 Corinthians.

(a) In 1 Cor. 1:26-31, Paul, to further his argument that the gospel he preached stands in direct contradiction to human expectations about God, turns to the existence of the Corinthians themselves as believers. The very fact God's church is made up mostly of "nobodies," people from the lower classes, shows the foolishness of God that confounds the wise.

(b) Celsus, a Roman opponent of Christianity in the late 2d century, ridiculed Christianity in these words:

Their injunctions are like this. "Let no one educated, no one wise, no one sensible draw near. For these abilities are thought by us to be evils. But as for anyone ignorant, anyone stupid, anyone uneducated, anyone who is a child, let him come boldly." By the fact that they themselves admit that these people are worthy of their God, they show that they want and are able to convince only the foolish, dishonorable and stupid, and only slaves, women, and little children.

(c) When God called out a people to be his, he called them without regard for their social status, without regard for their standing in the eyes of the world. And many who had status were offended that it was ignored. As David Garland comments on the Corinthian text (p. 74), "When Paul proclaimed the word of the cross, it did not attract the wise and powerful. They are not excluded but tend to exclude themselves by rejecting the wisdom of the cross, which does not honor their achievements but pours contempt on their pride."

(d) The church was filled with "riff-raff" in the world's eyes to make clear that salvation has nothing to do with human status or standing. It is not an entitlement of the privileged or a matter of human accomplishment but a completely undeserved gift. So no person may boast that he stands clean before God because of his intellect, education, or pedigree.

(2) In favoring the rich, they were honoring those who, for the most part, were unbelievers and were engaged in exploiting them, dragging them into court, and slandering the name of their Lord.

(a) Most of James's readers probably were poor agricultural laborers who were being bled dry by unscrupulous rich landowners and merchants. As part of that process, these rich oppressors undoubtedly were using their wealth and influence with the courts to secure favorable verdicts against the poor. Moo writes (PNTC, 109): "Practices familiar in every age, such as forcing people to forfeit their land for late payments of mortgages, insisting on ruinous interest rates for any monetary help, and the like, are probably in view."

(b) The fact the rich are slandering the name of Christ suggests that their oppression of poor Christians was at least in part motivated by religious discrimination.

c. seriousness of the sin (2:8-13)

⁸If you truly fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well; ⁹but if you show partiality, you commit sin, being convicted by the law as transgressors. ¹⁰For whoever keeps all the law but stumbles in one part has become guilty with regard to all parts. ¹¹For the one who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. ¹²Speak and act in this manner, as those about to be judged by the law of freedom. ¹³For judgment will be merciless to the one who did not show mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

(1) Showing partiality, dishonoring the poor, is a transgression of the "royal law," a transgression of the requirement in Scripture (Lev. 19:18) to "love your neighbor as yourself."

(a) This is called the "royal law" because it was singled out by Christ, the fulfiller and authoritative interpreter of the law, as the essence of the interpersonal aspects of the Mosaic law (Mat. 22:34-40). It thus was taught by Christ as an expression of God's will *for Christians*. James is not binding the Mosaic law on Christians.

(b) This is confirmed by the fact this "royal law" is described in 2:12 as the "law of freedom." In 1:25 the phrase "law of freedom" clearly has reference to the gospel, "the implanted word that is able to save your souls" (1:21).

(2) Even if they kept the royal law on every other occasion, that would not lessen their guilt in violating it with regard to partiality. The royal law, like the Mosaic law, is kept or broken as a unit. In other words, no violation of it is petty; no violation can be trivialized or offset by counterbalancing acts of obedience.

(a) The royal law is viewed as a body of particulars, a set of commands that are encompassed by the summary command "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." That is why James can refer to "all the law," "one part," and "all parts." So it is like the Mosaic law in that both have a plurality of moral requirements, many of which overlap.

(b) As I have said many times, Christians in the N.T. were not required to obey (other than as an accommodation) commandments of the Mosaic law relating

to circumcision, sacrifices, the priesthood, feasts, holy days, ritual purity laws, and food laws (see, e.g., Mat. 15:16-20; Mk. 7:18-19, indicating that the rules of ritual contamination are removed). These commandments point to deeper realities that have found their fulfillment in Christ. His one sacrifice has made those in him perpetually holy and clean; we are the true temple.

(c) The fundamental ethical requirement for the Christian is love (Mat. 7:12, 22:37-40; Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14), but some specific conduct is loving and other conduct is not. Love is the center, but there are definite requirements on how it expresses itself. As Paul indicates in Rom. 13:9, the command to love your neighbor as yourself encompasses the commands of the law not to commit adultery, not to murder, not to steal, and not to covet (and other commands he does not specify).

(d) Thus, the Christian, though not being under the Mosaic law, the set of commands that are part of Mosaic covenant, upholds the royal law, which encompasses the transcendent moral requirements that are included in the Mosaic law (e.g., Rom. 13:8-10; 1 Cor. 10:14; Eph. 6:2). It is this ongoing or re-expressed moral law, centered in love, that is the "law of Christ" (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2 [with 5:14]). That's why Paul can say in 1 Cor. 7:19, "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God [is everything]."

(3) James tells them that they must speak and act as those who are going to be judged by this law of freedom (2:12), by the ethical requirements of the gospel (note "law of freedom" in 1:25), because those who reject the ethics of faith, such as by not showing mercy to the poor, reject faith itself and the mercy that faith receives. This is the same idea behind the verses that speak of one's works as a basis for judgment (e.g., Mat. 25:31-46; Jn. 5:29; Rev. 20:12).

(a) As Moo states, "'Showing mercy' is, in fact, just what the love command requires (vs. 8) and what James' readers are failing to do when they 'dishonour the poor man.' This relationship between mercy and concern for the poor is explicit in Zechariah 7:9-10."

(b) This is an echo of Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant in Mat. 18:23-35. And as Moo notes:

James also, in effect, transforms Jesus' beatitude – "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (Matt. 5:7) – into its opposite: "Cursed are those who are not merciful, for they will not be shown mercy." Being "merciful," as these texts suggest, is not merely a feeling of concern, but involves actively reaching out to show love to others. The discrimination that James's readers are practicing is the opposite of such mercy; and if they continue on this path, they will find at the end of their lives a judgment "without mercy."

(c) This is what James means in saying "mercy triumphs over judgment." *Faithful* living (not sinlessness or perfect living) – which includes loving the poor, being merciful to them – will triumph over judgment in that the person who has a genuine faith, a faith that manifests in faithful living, will not be subject to judgment.

III. Defense of call to works in light of error (2:14-26)

A. Error of "faith only" shown from everyday example (2:14-17)

¹⁴What good is it, my brothers, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacking daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," but you do not give to them what is necessary for the body, what good is it? ¹⁷In the same way, faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

1. Having called his readers to good works, with regard to their hostility toward their oppressors and their preference toward the rich, James defends that call against a circulating false doctrine that works are irrelevant or insignificant for those in Christ.

a. This false doctrine probably originated in a misunderstanding of Paul's doctrine of justification by faith (e.g., Gal. 2:15-16, 21; Rom. 3:28, 4:1-8; Eph. 2:8). There are clear hints of this tendency to misunderstand in Rom. 6:1 and Gal. 5:13.

b. Paul began preaching in Syrian Antioch (Acts 11:25-26) in the mid-40s A.D. Jewish Christians "scattered" by the persecution following Stephen's death had traveled to Antioch and other places around Palestine (Acts 11:19). Some of those Christians had apparently misinterpreted Paul's doctrine as an excuse for moral laxity, reducing "faith" to mean simply intellectual assent. News of this misunderstanding reached the church in Jerusalem.

2. James first shows the error of that doctrine from an everyday example. Just as lip service to the poor is of no value, something they probably knew quite well, so faith without works is dead.

B. Error of "faith only" shown from fate of demons (2:18-19)

¹⁸But someone will say you have faith and I have works. Show me your faith without works, and I will show you my faith by works. ¹⁹You believe that God is one; you do well. The demons also believe - and shudder!

1. Because biblical faith involves a surrender of will, not simply an acceptance by the mind, works are an inevitable companion of faith. They are faith's "vital signs." James imagines a hypothetical third party taking issue with that perspective by saying "you" [the person in James's audience who claims works are not an essential concomitant of faith] have faith whereas "I" [James] have works, implying that either way is acceptable.¹ James, of course, denies that.

2. As proof that belief disconnected from life is inadequate, he cites the case of demons. They believe there is only one Almighty God but, because they are unwilling to act on that belief, it is inadequate to save them. Instead, they are left to shudder in fear (as their fate is the eternal fire – Mat. 25:41).

C. Error of "faith only" shown from Scripture (2:20-26)

²⁰But are you willing to understand, O foolish man, that faith without works is useless? ²¹Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²²You see that his faith worked with his good works, and that faith was made complete by the works, ²³and the scripture was fulfilled that says, "And Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. ²⁴You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. ²⁵Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by a different way? ²⁶For as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

1. Faith that saves is a living faith, a faith that finds expression in obedience. A dead faith is one that says "Lord, Lord" but refuses to act as though that confession is true (see, Lk. 6:46). To speak of a faith that has no works is like speaking of a human life that has no pulse, respiration, or brain waves.

2. Given that obedience inevitably accompanies saving faith, one cannot remain justified before God without obedience. The refusal to obey is conclusive proof there is no saving faith; there is only lip service. James stresses the obedience side of this equation because he was addressing those who had divorced faith from life and were hearing that one can be saved through a nonworking faith, through mere intellectual assent.

¹ A number of English versions put the key phrase in quotes – "you have faith and I have works" – thus treating it as a case of direct rather than indirect discourse. This is based largely on the fact the phrase is not preceded by "that," what is considered the common marker of indirect discourse. But Blomberg and Kamell (p. 134) state that "in Koine Greek, the sharp, classical boundaries between direct and indirect discourse were often blurred, and writers might shift suddenly from one to the other without any contextual indicators." So they translate the phrase without quotes.

3. These Jewish believers accepted that Abraham's obedience in offering Isaac was indispensable to his continuing justification before God. If he had refused to obey, if his faith had ceased to be a matter of both mind and will, he would no longer have been right with God.

4. James says a man is "justified by works not by faith alone" and cites Abraham (Gen. 22) as an example. Paul says (Rom. 3:28, 4:1-8) a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law and cites Abraham (Gen. 15) as an example. How are these positions to be understood?

a. Works are not the basis on which God's grace is bestowed; rather, they are the byproduct of the faith on which grace is bestowed. Since biblical faith, true saving faith, what Matthew Bates calls "allegiance," necessarily works, the absence of works indicates the absence of saving faith. So works are relevant to judgment (one is "justified" by them) only in a secondary or derivative sense. This is how I understand the verses that speak of one's works as a basis for judgment (e.g., Mat. 25:31-46; Jn. 5:29; Rev. 20:12).

b. The faith of which Paul spoke was not a dead faith, a sterile, inactive faith. For example, he said in Gal. 5:6: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; rather, [what matters is] faith *working* through love." He said in 1 Cor. 7:19: "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God [is everything]."

c. The issue Paul faced was whether Gentiles were obligated to obey the set of commands that comprised the Mosaic law, that set or package of commands that included such distinctive elements as circumcision, sacrifices, the priesthood, feasts, holy days, ritual purity laws, and food laws.

(1) Though the Mosaic covenant was an interim, subsidiary covenant which was given until God's earlier promise to Abraham began to be fulfilled in Christ, some Jews gave it priority over the Abrahamic covenant and exalted it to the point that the works of the law, the commands that were part of the Mosaic covenant, became the basis of one's relationship with God and thus the basis of one's inheritance (Lk. 18:9-14; Rom. 3:27 - 4:8, 9:30 - 10:8; Gal. 2:16, 3:2, 5, 10; Phil. 3:2-11). In other words, some turned the Mosaic law into a legalistic path of salvation. Making salvation something gained by works impermissibly changed the prior and ongoing Abrahamic covenant by canceling out its promissory character (Rom. 4:13-17; Gal. 3:15-18).

(2) Part of Paul's explanation why the Gentiles were not obligated to obey the Mosaic law, contrary to the Judaizers' insistence (see, e.g., Acts 15:1, 5), was that one's standing before God is not based on one's works; it is a gift bestowed by God on the basis of faith (Rom. 3:28, 4:1-8). So to the extent Jews sought to bind the Mosaic law out of a belief that obedience to it achieved or was the basis of one's salvation, they were wrong. (Indeed, the

fact Abraham's justification preceded his works shows that works are not the basis of his right standing in the eyes of God.)

(3) Another part of Paul's explanation why the Gentiles were not obligated to obey the Mosaic law was that the Christ event had rendered the old *covenant* obsolete and thus had rendered the *body of laws* that were part of that covenant obsolete (2 Cor. 3:4-18; Gal. 3:15 – 4:7). Indeed, the fact some Jews clung to the Mosaic law, insisted on applying it beyond the time of its divinely designed obsolescence, was evidence they had distorted it into the basis of their salvation.

(4) The fact Christians are not under the Mosaic law does not mean that no commands in the Mosaic law have an ongoing or renewed applicability. Some moral requirements of God that were included in the Mosaic *set* of commands continue to be applicable and indeed find their full expression in the new covenant. The law of Christ, which is based on love, includes some of those same commands (but not by virtue of their being in the Mosaic law), but it does not include things like circumcision and the myriad food laws, Sabbath and festival observances, and sacrificial rites. So if any Jews argued that those kind of "amoral" civil and ceremonial aspects that separated Jews and Gentiles were necessary manifestations of saving faith, as James argues about the ethical implications of the gospel, they were wrong.

d. The issue James faced was whether mere mental assent to the truths of Christ was sufficient for salvation. (The fact Abraham's justification would not have continued without works shows that saving faith is more than mental assent.) He declared it was not, and Paul would have agreed with him. As Daniel B. Wallace says (*Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 219): "Both James and Paul would agree, I believe, with the statement: 'Faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is not alone.'" Moo writes (PNTC, 43):

Christians need to continue to pay attention to the warning of James that true faith is to be tested by its works and that only a faith that issues in works is genuinely saving faith. James recognizes that Christians continue to sin (3:2), so he clearly does not expect 100 percent conformity to the will of God. But how high must the percentage be? How many works are necessary to validate true, saving faith? James, of course, gives no answer. But what we can say with confidence on the basis of James's teaching is that the claim of anyone who is totally unconcerned to lead a life of obedience to God to have saving faith must be questioned.

e. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a brilliant young German (Lutheran) pastor and seminary teacher who opposed Adolph Hitler's policies and was executed by the Nazis just days before the Allies swept in to liberate Germany. He wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship*:

Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. Costly grace . .

. is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble, it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him" (from *The Cost of Discipleship*, quoted in *Christianity Today* 2/7/94 p. 39).

5. Rahab's faith was expressed in her welcoming and protecting Israel's spies. She did not say, "I believe in God" and then refuse to honor the agents of God. Her walk matched her talk.

IV. Caution about role of teacher in light of error (3:1-5a)

A. Stricter judgment and potential for error (3:1-2)

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, because you know that we will receive a stricter judgment. ²For we all stumble in many ways; if anyone does not stumble in speech, he is a complete man, able to bridle the entire body as well.

1. The existence of the error that mere mental assent to the truths of Christ is sufficient for salvation prompts James to issue a caution regarding teachers. He says that not many of them should become teachers, and the reason he gives is that teachers will receive a stricter (or greater) judgment. Moo remarks (PNTC, 150):

Teachers, because they bear so much responsibility for the spiritual welfare of those to whom they minister, will be scrutinized by the Lord more carefully than others. Jesus warned: "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Luke 12:48). God has given to teachers a great gift and entrusted to them "the deposit" of the faith (cf. 2 Tim. 1:14). He will expect a careful account of the stewardship. Paul reflects just this sense of responsibility as he addresses the elders of the church at Ephesus. He stressed that he had been faithful to his task as a herald of the gospel: "I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God" (Acts 20:26-27).

2. The reason this stricter judgment should cause them to think twice about becoming teachers is that, of all the ways we humans stumble, sinning in speech is among the easiest. The potential for sinning in speech is so great that if one could keep the tongue in check so as not to sin with it one could bring anything under control. In that case, you would have "arrived"; you'd be complete or perfect or fully mature. So stricter judgment, combined with the

potential for stumbling that exists when you're running your mouth (as a teacher does), means that careful consideration is required before becoming a teacher.

3. In saying that not many of them should become teachers, James is referring to their present state of spiritual immaturity. Not many of them were ready to be teachers. In Heb. 5:12, the writer rebukes the immature for not progressing in faith so as to be able to teach. They are addressing immaturity from different directions. James says, in essence, you are too immature to be teaching; the Hebrew writer says you shouldn't be so immature.

B. Great effect of teaching on church (3:3-5a)

³Now if we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they will be responsive to us, we also guide their entire body. ⁴Also look at the ships: though being so large and driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder where the impulse of the pilot wills. ⁵In the same way, the tongue is a small member, yet boasts great things.

1. Caution is needed in becoming a teacher not only because the teacher faces a stricter judgment and a significant risk of stumbling but also because teaching has a great influence on the direction of the church, the local body of Christ. Just as a small bit directs a horse and a small rudder directs a ship, so the small tongue directs the community's spiritual course.

2. So it is no surprise that the inspired writers of the New Testament so often were challenging and correcting things that were being taught in the communities to which they wrote. Paul, James, Peter, John, and Jude all do it, as does the Lord Jesus in the letters to the churches in Revelation. They did so because teaching matters. In the words of v. 5, the tongue boasts great things in that the teaching it delivers can have tremendous effects.

3. Exhibit "A" is the claim James had heard was circulating that works are of no significance in the Christian's life. If that were taught to Christians as the truth of God, the effect on the congregation would be catastrophic. Christians would become casual about sin and thus would be condemned.

4. You see the urgency with which Jude addresses the same idea in Jude 3-4: *Beloved, although being very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I had a compulsion to write to you urging [you] to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. ⁴For certain men slipped in stealthily, the ones having been marked out long ago for this condemnation, godless men who have perverted the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.*

5. The significance and potential impact of teaching on the body of Christ is why elders, those who shepherd a congregation, must be skillful in teaching (1 Tim. 3:2). Paul tells Titus in Tit. 1:19 that an elder "must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it."

6. Churches throughout the country are facing a strong post-modern current that is pushing them to minimize or ignore biblical doctrine to reduce the risk of turning off younger people. We are culturally pressured to be like politicians – to say nothing concrete, nothing of theological substance, so as not to give people anything with which to disagree. But this leaves the church to be conformed to the culture's vision rather than to God's will as revealed in the Bible. As Roger Olson remarked the other day (7/20/17) in an article in *Christianity Today*:

There is a trend toward what I call 'generic Christianity' that is very feeling-centered and pragmatic and somewhat anti-intellectual. As denominational particularities are ignored or hidden, what's often left is a 'lowest common denominator' spirituality that is often little more than 'worship' and 'discipleship' devoid of cognitive content. The result is often folk religion rather than historic, classic, biblical Christianity.

V. Call to harmony among believers (3:5b - 4:12)

A. Cursing (3:5b-12)

See how a fire of small size ignites a forest of great size. ⁶And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is a world of unrighteousness placed among our members; it stains the entire body and sets on fire the course of life and is set on fire by hell. ⁷For all kinds of beasts and birds, of reptiles and sea creatures, are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, ⁸but no man is able to tame the tongue; it is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men who have been made according to God's likeness. ¹⁰Out of the same mouth comes blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not be so. ¹¹Does a spring pour forth the sweet and the bitter from the same opening? ¹²My brothers, can a fig tree produce olives, or a grapevine figs? Neither can a salt spring produce sweet water.

1. James here pivots to the division or disharmony among his readers by turning the discussion from the tongue's influence, its ability to direct the course of things like horses and ships, to its destructiveness. This subject occupies him through 4:12.

a. We know there was division and disharmony among the Christians he was addressing. He later refers to their conflicts and quarrels (4:1), their speaking against one

another (4:11), and their grumbling against one another (5:9). So it makes sense to see the cursing he refers to in 3:9-12 as something they were directing toward their fellow Christians. Certainly what he says about cursing would apply to cursing non-Christians, who also are made in the image of God, but I think his focus here is on their cursing each other.

b. Perhaps the financial pressure brought on by economic oppression caused some Christians to become stingy and to love the world in the sense of focusing unduly on how to gain more financial security. This may have caused complaining, bitterness, and divisions within the community. Indeed, the warning about grumbling against one another in 5:9 is given in the context of exhorting them to patience in the face of suffering.

2. James compares the destructive potential of a small fire, something that can burn down an entire forest, to that of the tongue, which he labels "a fire." Contrary to pure and undefiled religion, which requires one to keep oneself unspotted by the world (1:27), the tongue stains the entire person and wreaks havoc throughout one's life. Jesus taught in Mat. 15:11, 18-19 that what comes out of a person's mouth is what makes him "unclean." In elaborating, he noted that the mouth expresses the heart, in which are found evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, and slander.

3. In saying that the tongue "is set on fire by hell" (3:6b), I think James is saying that the sinful speech ultimately leads to judgment, where the tongue, along with the entire person, experiences the fire of hell. He may, however, be saying that the tongue derives its destructive power, its fire, from Satan, the one who is most intimately associated with hell. In other words, he's the one exploiting this avenue of sinfulness.

4. In vv. 7-8 James reminds us that the tongue is extremely difficult to bring under control.

a. Mankind's prowess in taming things is evident in its taming of all kinds of creatures, but no man can thoroughly subdue the tongue. It is a restless evil in the sense it just won't quit. Just when you think you've mastered it, you'll find yourself lying or boasting or flattering or gossiping or slandering or abusing or cursing or speaking obscenely.

b. Regarding James's statement that no man is able to tame the tongue, Moo writes (PNTC, 161-162):

[D]oes James and/or the NT as a whole envisage the possibility of Christians attaining perfection in this life? We have answered this question in the negative . . . James does, indeed, suggest that the ultimate taming of the tongue is impossible. Should this lead us to abandon all efforts to bring our speech under control? Of course not. The realization that perfection is unattainable should not dampen in the least our enthusiasm to become as good as it is possible. We may never reach the point where the tongue is perfectly controlled; but we can surely advance a long way in using our speech to glorify God.

5. "Cursing" is not simply abusive language; it is, in the sense James means, calling in anger for God to cut a person off from any possible blessing and to consign that person to hell. More generally, it is calling, from ill will, for harm to befall another (e.g., "I wish you would die").

a. Christians are to bless those who curse them (Lk. 6:28; 1 Cor. 4:12) and are not to curse those who persecute them (Rom. 12:14), but that does not mean that cursing others, calling on God to punish them, always is wrong. Paul, writing by the Spirit, sometimes invoked curse formulas (e.g., 1 Corinthians 16:22; Gal. 1:8-9). So there can be a cursing that is noble and godly, as where one seeks to expose to others the gravity and danger of the cursed person's conduct or desires that God's glory and purpose be vindicated.

b. Given that the psalmists cry out to God for justice against the perpetrators of evil against them (e.g., Ps. 69:22-28) and Psalms was the "hymnbook of the temple," and given that the souls of the martyrs in Rev. 6:10 cry out to know how long it will be before God judges and avenges their blood, God accepts and even invites these expressions of the heart.

c. Peter Davids remarks (p. 146):

In the NT one finds the words of Jesus forbidding cursing (Lk. 6:28), as well as those of Paul (Rom. 12:14), but apparently such prohibitions were not interpreted as absolute in all circumstances, for Paul certainly expressed at least curselike formulas . . . and Jude, to name another example, is virtually a long curse pronouncement on certain teachers. What James appears to be referring to is the use of a curse in anger, especially in inner-church party strife.

d. As with anger, the key to whether such an appeal is acceptable seems to be the motive that produces it. If it is motivated by wounded pride, by a desire for God to be one's "muscle" to show an enemy he cannot mess *with you*, it has a self-centeredness that is wrong. If it is motivated by a desire for God to express his glory in rendering justice and being faithful to his word and his commitment to the victims of unrighteousness, it is acceptable. This is admittedly a fine line, but so is the motivational line between righteous and sinful anger. And given that it *is* a fine line, the crossing of which we can so readily rationalize, one must be hypervigilant in expressing righteous anger or cursing and perhaps would be wise to leave it alone altogether, at least in connection with wrongs done to you personally.

6. James is talking about cursing as fruit of sinful anger. He says that such cursing is incompatible with the nature of a Christian. It is totally out of place to pour forth from our mouths the fresh water of praise to God and then later, from the same mouth, to pour forth the bitter water of cursing. Natural springs don't alternate that way. It is as contrary to the Christian's nature to curse others sinfully as it would be for a fig tree to produce olives, a grapevine to produce figs, or a salt spring to produce fresh water.

B. Envy and rivalry (3:13-18)

¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good behavior his achievements in humility born of wisdom. ¹⁴But if you have bitter envy and rivalry in your heart, do not boast and do not lie against the truth. ¹⁵This is not the wisdom that comes down from above but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶For where there is envy and rivalry, there is disorder and every evil practice. ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial, and sincere. ¹⁸And the crop of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

1. Continuing his instruction regarding sins of division, James warns his readers about envy and rivalry. Apparently envy and rivalry were being cloaked with a claim of wisdom. In other words, it seems that envy and rivalry were being spun or justified as appropriate exercises of wisdom.

2. James says that those who are wise and understanding of the things of God must manifest by good behavior their growth in the humility that true wisdom produces. If contrary to such humility-based behavior they have envy and rivalry in their hearts, they have no business boasting of being wise. In doing so, they contradict the truth that wisdom breeds humility.

3. Whatever wisdom they have, it is not from above; it is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. Its demonic origin is shown by the fact envy and rivalry (the conduct-producing attitudes that are born of their "wisdom") produce disorder and every evil practice.

4. In contrast, those possessing true wisdom, the wisdom from above, are:

a. first and foremost, pure – Unadulterated in their pursuit of the things of God; they are not double-minded.

b. peaceable, gentle, compliant – They make peace because they are gentle and compliant (or deferential). They are not combative but willing to "go along" when unalterable principles are not involved. Paul is a good example (1 Cor. 9:22 – "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some").

c. full of mercy and good fruits, impartial – They exhibit mercy, kindness, and honor without prejudice to their neighbors (unlike how they had treated the poor man in 2:13). This produces unity and goodwill.

d. sincere – They are genuine, acting without show or pretense.

5. Those who are peacemakers, the truly wise who live humility-based lives, are thereby sowing a crop of righteousness because an environment of peace is conducive to righteousness (as envy and rivalry are conducive to "every evil practice"). That is the community context, the state of bodily health, in which spiritual nourishment, strengthening, and encouragement flow throughout the body. The disorder and evil practices (against one another) that are born of envy and rivalry are a bodily disease that hinders its flourishing.

C. Conflicts and quarrels (4:1-3)

What is the source of conflicts and quarrels among you? Do they not come from your pleasures that battle in your members? ²You want and do not have, so you kill and are filled with jealousy; you are unable to obtain, so you quarrel and wage war. You do not have because you do not ask. ³You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly, that you may spend [it] on your pleasures.

1. As Moo states (PNTC, 180-181), "The quarrels of James's day have too often marred the Christian church."

a. The 17th-century Jewish philosopher Spinoza observed:

I have often wondered that persons who make boast of professing the Christian religion – namely love, joy, peace, temperance, and charity to all men – should quarrel with such rancorous animosity and display daily towards one another such bitter hatred, that this, rather than the virtues which they profess, is the readiest criteria of their faith.

b. The January 2006 issue of the *Christian Chronicle* had an interview with Kevin Bethea, a Pentecostal preacher who resigned his ordination after becoming convinced that the beliefs of those in churches of Christ are more in line with the Scriptures. In December 1995 he planted the East Baltimore Church of Christ, which has grown from 35 to 350 members (as of 2015).

(1) The interviewer asked, "What happened when you turned in your Church of God licenses and credentials to the bishop?" Bethea answered: "I told him I was leaving. He said, 'You don't want to go over there to those people.' I said, 'Why?' He said, 'You don't know about those church of Christ people. They fight about everything. They'll fight about the color of the drapes.'"

(2) That's not good. Even when a battle must be fought, that must be done without sacrificing Christian principles and virtues.

2. The conflicts and quarrels occurring among James's readers are rooted in the envy and jealousy that springs from frustrated desires (4:1-2b). Because they don't have what they want, they hate and are filled with jealousy, which leads to quarrelling and fighting.

a. James says in v.2a, "You want and do not have, so *you kill* and are filled with jealousy." This raises the question of whether the hostility within the church had reached the point that they literally had committed murder.

b. Some think that is the case, but I suspect James is drawing on the teaching of Jesus in equating sinful anger with murder (Mat. 5:21-26). If this teaching were well known, that would explain why James didn't need to indicate that his use was nonliteral. Or perhaps he referred to their current fighting and jealousy as "killing" because, if unchecked, that is what it leads to (a hypothetical eventuality). I think either of these possibilities is more likely than believing that James would pass so quickly over such a serious matter in the church as murder.

3. To the extent their frustrated desires are for things needed to serve and glorify God, they do not have because they do not ask God to provide them (4:2c).

4. To the extent their frustrated desires are for things to indulge their pleasures, they do not have, despite asking God for them, because God does not honor such selfishly motivated requests (4:3). Moo comments (p. 185):

Jesus had promised, "Ask and it will be given to you" (Matt. 7:7). But clearly Jesus had in mind that asking which has as its focus and motive God's name, God's kingdom, and God's will (Matt. 6:9-10) – not an asking that had the purpose of the indulgence of those 'pleasures' (*hēdonai*) that are at war with our souls (cf. v. 1).

D. Call to submit to God (4:4-10)

⁴Adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever decides to be a friend of the world is made an enemy of God. ⁵Or do you think that the scripture speaks in vain? The spirit which he caused to dwell in us longs enviously, ⁶but he gives greater grace. Therefore, it says, "God opposes the arrogant, but gives grace to the humble." ⁷Be subject, then, to God, but resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹Lament and

mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into gloominess. ¹⁰Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

1. In 4:4-10 James issues a clear call to repent of all such sin. "Adulteresses" is an O.T. allusion to unfaithful people of God. His readers had embraced the hostility and divisiveness of the world, thereby being unfaithful to God, and seemingly were oblivious to their spiritual infidelity. This is consistent with the moral blind spot I suggested they had with regard to their sins of anger and evil speech in 1:19-27.

2. He tells them plainly that whoever decides to befriend the world has been made an enemy of God. Scripture does not speak in vain when it says God is a jealous God (e.g., Ex. 20:5, 34:14; Zech. 8:2). He tolerates no adultery!

a. "Friendship" in the Greco-Roman world was much stronger than our sense of the word. We speak casually of "friends," but in that world there was an essential equality and unity of friends. Ancient writers said that friends are "one soul," that they "share all things in common," that they "saw things the same way," and that a friend is "another self" (Johnson, 243-244).

b. That puts Jn. 15:14-15 in a new light: "You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you."

c. Moo writes:

We have no evidence that James's readers were overtly disclaiming God and consciously deciding to follow the world instead. But their tendency to imitate the world by discriminating against people (2:1-13), by speaking negatively of others (3:1-12), by exhibiting "bitter envy" and "selfish ambition" (3:13-18), and by pursuing their own destructive pleasures (4:1-3) amounted to just that. James, as it were, wants to raise the stakes so that his readers see their compromising conduct for what it really is. God tolerates no rival. When believers behave in a worldly manner, that demonstrates that, at that point, their allegiance is to the world rather than to God.

3. I follow those commentators (e.g., James Adamson, Sophie Laws, Robert Wall, Kurt Richardson, Scot McKnight) in understanding *pneuma* as the subject of 4:5b and in identifying it with the human spirit (see also, ASV, NEB, NIV'84, REB, NET). I also think it makes the most sense to detach 5a from 5b and create two separate sentences, the first being a question. So, in my view, James is saying that despite their (characteristically human) affair with the world through envy and its related evils – our spirits gravitate toward the world, i.e., long enviously – God is willing and able to provide grace sufficient to overcome that sinfulness.

4. Because of the availability of this overcoming grace, Scripture (Prov. 3:34, esp. LXX) says "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Humility before God is the condition for receiving this grace. As David wrote in Ps. 51:16-17:

You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart,
O God, you will not despise.

5. They must shake off the self-righteousness engendered in part by their perceived superiority to their oppressors and humble themselves before the Lord. Through repentance they will receive exaltation by God's grace.

E. Command not to slander (4:11-12)

¹¹Do not speak against one another, brothers. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law, and if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. ¹²There is one lawgiver and judge, the one who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?

1. As fruit of that humbling, they must cease speaking against one another. They must surrender to the will of the Lord.

2. To put down a brother or sister for personal reasons is to criticize and judge the *royal law* which forbids such things. According to 2:8, the royal law is "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," which they are violating in "judging (condemning on their own accord) their neighbor" (v. 12b). In thus rejecting the law, refusing to live by it, they are sitting in judgment of it, putting themselves above it as judges.

3. God, the one who is able to save and to destroy, is the only legitimate lawgiver and judge. They have no business usurping his role as judge. (Note: that is all our society wants to do!)

VI. Criticism of the wealthy (4:13 - 5:6)

A. Rebuke of believers neglecting poor believers (4:13-17)

¹³Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this city and spend a year there, carry on business and make a profit," ¹⁴who do not know the course of tomorrow. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. ¹⁵Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." ¹⁶But now, you boast in your pretensions. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷Therefore, to the one who knows the good to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.

1. In 4:13-17 James addresses those wealthy believers who, as demonstrated by the certainty with which they spoke of their business plans, lived under the belief they were guaranteed tomorrow. Proverbs 27:1 warns: "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth."

a. That these merchants are Christians is indicated by the fact James chastises them for failing to look at life from a Christian perspective (v. 14), urges them to acknowledge the Lord's sovereignty and providence as they make their plans (v. 15), and suggests that they know what they ought to do in this matter (v. 17). James would hardly address non-Christians this way. That those addressed here probably are Christians is recognized by Adamson, Davids, Burdick, Moo, and Blomberg and Kamell.

b. So not all the Jewish Christians were in dire straits. There were some who had managed to acquire or maintain some level of wealth. This may have fueled the division, envy, and rivalry within the community.

2. He exposes this attitude as an arrogant delusion. The fact of the matter is that their future is in the hands of the Lord, and to boast as though the future is in our hands is evil. As Moo remarks:

This world is not a closed system; what appears to our senses to be the totality of existence is in fact only part of the whole. This life cannot properly be understood without considering the spiritual realm, a realm that impinges on and ultimately determines the material realm in which we live day to day.

3. The connection of v. 17 is not obvious, but I think Sophie Laws is onto something. Given the fact tomorrow is in the hands of the Lord and the fact they do not know his plans, they cannot justify not acting today on the basis that they'll act tomorrow. They have no excuse for putting off till tomorrow doing the good they knew to do (i.e., helping their poorer brothers).

a. This may seem like a stretch, but that concept is present in Prov. 3:27-28, especially in the LXX rendering. The LXX states (NETS): ²⁷ *Do not withhold to do good to the needy, when your hand can help.* ²⁸ *Do not say, "Go, come back, and tomorrow I will give," when you are able to do good, for you do not know what the next day will bring.* The NET translates the Masoretic Text as: ²⁷ *Do not withhold good from those who need it, when you have*

the ability to help. ²⁸ *Do not say to your neighbor, "Go! Return tomorrow and I will give it," when you have it with you at the time.*

b. James already appealed to Prov. 3:34 in 4:6. So there is reason to believe Proverbs 3 is in his thoughts.

B. Fate of unbelievers oppressing poor believers (5:1-6)

Come now, you rich people, weep and wail over your coming misery. ²Your riches have rotted, and your garments have become moth-eaten; ³your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will serve as a testimony against you and will eat your flesh like fire. ⁴Look! The wages of the workers who reaped your fields, which have been withheld by you, are crying out, and the cries of those who reaped have reached the ears of the Lord of armies. ⁵You lived a self-indulgent life on the earth and lived luxuriously. You fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. ⁶You condemned and killed the righteous man; he does not resist you.

1. In 5:1-6 he announces the fate of the unbelievers who are oppressing the poor believers. He does this so that the faithful, hearing the miserable end of the rich, might not envy their wealth and so that they may gain strength to endure in knowing that God would avenge the wrongs done to them.

2. These people love money so much that they are willing to abuse, exploit and even "kill" God's people to obtain and preserve it.

a. James's use of the word "condemned" in v. 6 points to some kind of judicial verdict, which suggests (again) that they were using their wealth and influence to deprive the righteous poor of their rights and of their living.

b. The practical outcome of cheating the poor out of their land and taking away their gainful employment was that they would starve to death (hence the reference that they "murder" or "kill" the righteous man). As said in the Jewish writing Ecclesiasticus (a.k.a. The Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach) 34:22, which was written in the 2nd century B.C., "To take away a neighbor's living is to murder him; to deprive an employee of his wages is to shed blood."

3. They have made a fool's choice. Though they enjoyed luxury for a time, the material things to which they devoted themselves will not last. The temporality of these goods, depicted by their rust, will testify to the foolishness of their choice. In the end, their idolatry will bring God's wrath upon them (the rust of their goods will consume even them).

4. Paul writes in 1 Tim. 6:6-10: ⁶*But godliness with contentment is great gain, ⁷for we have brought nothing into the world; [it is clear] that neither are we able to carry anything out. ⁸But if we have means of subsistence and coverings, we will be content with these. ⁹Those who want to be rich fall into temptation, into a trap, and into many foolish and harmful cravings that plunge men into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some, by striving after money, wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.* Love of money is a spiritual death trap. Groups that promote the love of money, that make the pursuit of wealth the center of a person's life, are evil. The love of money cannot be justified or sanctified by the claim that money lovers have more to use for God. See also, Mat. 6:24.

5. Paul also writes in 1 Tim. 6:17-19: ¹⁷*Command those who are rich in the present age not to be haughty or to have their hope set on the uncertainty of riches, but on God who richly provides us all things for enjoyment. ¹⁸Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, to be generous and sharing, ¹⁹thus laying up for themselves a good foundation for the future, that they may take hold of the real life.* Wealth is fine if kept in the proper perspective. Wealth is to be used for the glory of God.

6. The fate of these wealthy oppressors is revealed as an encouragement to those being oppressed. Faithfulness to God doesn't always appear in this life to be the wisest move. They were suffering whereas the impudent were living high. But their choice will be vindicated! See, e.g., Mat. 25:31-46.

VII. Encouragement to stand firm during oppression by rich (5:7-11)

⁷Be patient, then, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. Notice, the farmer waits for the earth's precious crop, being patient over it until it receives the early and late rains. ⁸You also be patient. Strengthen your hearts, because the coming of the Lord has drawn near. ⁹Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you not be judged. Look! The Judge is standing at the doors. ¹⁰As an example, brothers, of patience amid suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹Notice, we consider blessed those who endured. You heard of Job's endurance and saw the purpose of the Lord, that the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

A. In view of their ultimate vindication in relation to the rich oppressors, they must stand firm until that day, i.e., until the coming of the Lord. As a farmer does not quit on his crop even though the harvest is yet future, so they must not quit on their faith even though its full vindication or reward is yet future.

B. In fact, they should be strengthened to stand by the nearness of the Judge.

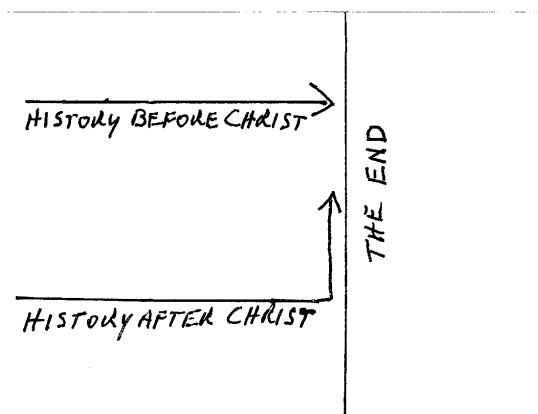
1. The nearness of the Lord's return is indicated in a number of places in the N.T. (e.g., Rom. 13:12; 1 Pet. 4:7; Rev. 1:1, 3, 3:11, 22:6-7, 10, 12, 20). With the Christ event, the end has drawn near in that the *necessary grounds or basis* for the final eternal state has occurred. The victory has been won by Christ; his atoning death purchased not only our reconciliation but that of all creation. From the time of Christ's redemptive work, the final state has been, as we might say, "a done deal." All that remains is for the consequence of Christ's achievement to play out.

a. Christ's work was essential for the victory, for the redemption of creation, because it is the only means by which God forgives sin consistently with his holiness and righteousness. When the victory that has already been won by Christ will be "cashed out" or fully expressed, when God will send the Christ to consummate the kingdom, to bring history to a close with the eternal state, is a matter of God's unknown timing.

(1) As Jesus says in Mk. 13:32 (also Mat. 24:36) (ESV), "But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

(2) Peter specifically cautions his readers in 2 Pet. 3:8-10 not to allow the apparent slowness of Christ's return to become a cause for doubting the certainty of it. He tells them that God operates in his own dimension of time – with the Lord one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day – so that he cannot be judged by human perceptions of slowness.

b. Since Christ's achievement, creation has been on the verge of the end. This (poorly drawn) diagram may help you in conceptualize the idea. It's from J. H. Newman, a 19th-century pastor, and was cited in the commentaries on 1 John by F. F. Bruce, I. Howard Marshall, and Gary Burge. As long as this reality, history as we know it, continues, it does so on the brink of Christ's return and the consummation of all things. However long God in his purposes extends the time since Christ, Christ's coming is ever at our door.



c. Further illustrating the concept

(1) To use a mundane analogy, it is as if all the defenders in a football play had been blocked so hard as to be unconscious. When the last defender is knocked out, the touchdown is already secured at that point; the only question is how long the runner will choose to take before crossing the goal line.

(2) Or think of a will that calls for the executor to bestow on the heirs an inheritance at whatever time the executor chooses. Once the testator dies, the inheritance draws near in the sense it now may come at any time. With the testator's death, what is necessary for the exercise of the executor's discretion has occurred. From the testator's death on, the heirs live on the brink of their inheritance but without knowing when it would arrive.

(3) Now imagine that the will calls for the executor to bestow the inheritance at such time as the executor allows weeds to sprout by removing his protection against them. The inheritance will not be bestowed until the weeds sprout, but that *set of events*, the bestowal of the inheritance and the sprouting weeds with which it is associated, has drawn near with the testator's death because they both can occur in a short period of time at the executor's discretion.

(4) Similarly, the Christian inheritance in the eternal state will not be bestowed until God allows Antichrist, the man of lawlessness, to appear by removing his protection against him, but that set of events has drawn near with Christ's redemptive work because they both can occur swiftly, in a short *period* of time, at God's discretion.

d. Here's how Moo puts the general point (p. 224):

With the death and resurrection of Jesus and pouring out of the Spirit, the "last days" have been inaugurated. This final age of salvation will find its climax in the return of Christ in glory. But – and here is the crucial point – the length of the age is unknown. Not even Jesus knew how long the "last days" would last (cf. Mark 13:32). What this means is that the return of Christ, as the next event in the salvation-historical timetable, is, from the time of the early church to our own day, "near," or "imminent." Every generation of Christians lives (or should live!) with the consciousness that the *parousia* could occur at any time and that one needs to make decisions and choose values based on that realization. So it was as true in James's day as it is in ours: we need to *be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near*.

e. Some claim that the N.T. writers erred in saying that the end had drawn near or that Jesus was returning "soon" because history revealed that he did *not* come soon. But in the sense just explained, Christ's coming was "soon" in every generation. Robert Shank writes in *Until: The Coming of Messiah and His Kingdom* (Springfield, MO: Westcott Publishers, 1982), 395-396:

Said a professor of theology whom I know

The apostolic Church believed Christ would return in their day. He did not, and they were wrong. Other generations of the Church believed that Christ would come in their day, but time proved them all wrong. If we expect Christ to return in our day, time will no doubt prove us wrong.

Not at all. In every generation of the Church, all who expected Christ to return in their time were right, and all who did not were wrong, terribly *wrong*. Christ, the apostles, and the entire NT enjoin upon us no other attitude than to expect Jesus to return in our time. Whether he returns in our day is God's responsibility; whether we expect his return is our responsibility, for which we must give account. Whether he returns in our generation or not, we are wrong if we fail to expect him. In every generation of the Church, "the Lord is at hand." This is the time frame of the NT, including the Revelation.

C. In the interim, as they wait in the midst of trials, they must not turn on one another. That can happen when the pressure gets cranked up, James's audience being an example. To do so would be to risk judgment themselves because that is aligning oneself with the world instead of God.

D. The prophets serve as a good illustration of those who "hung tough" in the midst of trials. Those who endured – for example, the faithful of Heb. 11:32-38 – are considered blessed; in other words, the wisdom of their choice is universally recognized. As with Job, those who are faithful in suffering, who will not be driven by their hardship to "curse God and die," ultimately receive the Lord's compassion and mercy.

VIII. Concluding remarks (5:12-20)

A. Instruction not to swear (5:12)

¹²Above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath; but let your "Yes" be yes and your "No" no, so that you not fall under condemnation.

1. Swearing is not dirty language. It refers to taking an oath whereby one appeals to God to substantiate the truthfulness of a statement or the commitment to a promise. The question of what qualified as an appeal to God so as to constitute a binding oath was complicated by the fact it was considered blasphemous to speak God's name. So the Jews developed complex distinctions and regulations for when an appeal was sufficiently related to God's name to be

considered a real oath and thus something that was binding. You see this in Mat. 23:16-22. For example, swearing *by* Jerusalem was not binding, but swearing *toward* Jerusalem was binding.

2. James does not say why he gives them this instruction, but I can imagine the poor Christians were tempted to bolster their credibility in disputes with their more powerful, ungodly oppressors. When they were being cheated or falsely accused by people who may have been favored because of their social standing, I can see them being tempted to try something to help their cause.

3. James, in accordance with Jesus' instructions in Mat. 5:34-37, forbids them from swearing. The Old Testament requirement of keeping one's oath (not swearing falsely) points to the fundamental importance of truthfulness. That requirement finds its fulfillment in a truthfulness that is so consistent that there is no place for an oath. Since every word of theirs was to be honest and binding, there was no place for them to offer sworn speech as distinctively trustworthy. To do so was an indictment against one's own integrity, which is why he says that buttressing one's speech with oaths comes from evil; it is a reflection of an untrustworthy character.

4. Johnson puts it like this (p. 341):

If speech is meant to be a primary symbol of the self, if it is from the heart's overflow that the tongue is meant to speak, then the invocation of a special realm (whether heaven or earth) or power (the name of the Lord) to buttress one's own speech becomes, paradoxically, an admission that one's own speech is untrustworthy without such warrant. The more towering the oath, the more impressive the power invoked to support my own statement, the more suspect my innate truthfulness appears.

5. The Jewish historian Josephus reports that the sect of Jews known as Essenes shared this view. He wrote: "Every statement of theirs is surer than an oath and with them swearing is avoided, for they think it worse than perjury. For they say that he who is not trustworthy except when he appeals to God is already under condemnation" (quoted in Johnson, 327).

6. This prohibition probably is limited to voluntary oaths. In an official oath, one that responsible authorities require, the one swearing is not offering the testimony as more reliable. He is simply complying with someone else's requirement for trustworthiness.

7. If Paul's "witness formula" (e.g., 2 Cor. 1:23; Gal. 1:20) qualifies as swearing, it may be that love requires that voluntary oaths be given when skepticism makes them necessary to benefit others. See also, God swearing (Heb. 6:17). There's a difference in my swearing to you that my elixir is an antidote to a snake bite so you'll buy my product and my swearing that it's an antidote so you'll take it before you die.

B. Instruction re suffering, cheer, and illness (5:13-18)

¹³Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. ¹⁴Is anyone among you sick? Let him summon the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, having anointed him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵And the prayer of faith will save the one who is ill, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, it will be forgiven him. ¹⁶Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is very powerful in its working. ¹⁷Elijah was a man with the same nature as us, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. ¹⁸And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its crop.

1. They are to pray in suffering, during all sorts of afflictions and trials (see "suffering" in v. 10 referring to the prophets). They certainly should pray for wisdom to see the situation clearly (1:5) and for strength to endure the hardship faithfully should the Lord choose not to deliver them from it.

2. They are to sing praise to God when cheerful, when they are comforted and happy in heart (a state that does not depend on outward circumstances). It is easy for us to forget God when we are in good spirits, but we must remember that he is the giver of our contentment. Singing praise is closely related to prayer (1 Cor. 14:15); in fact, it can be seen as a form of prayer.

3. James 5:14 almost certainly means "Is anyone among you *sick*?" meaning physically ill rather than spiritually weak. This is recognized by virtually all modern English translations.

a. When this word (*astheneō*) is used to indicate spiritual weakness, that meaning is made clear by some kind of qualifier or by the context.

b. The Gospels, which include the accounts that have exercised the greatest influence on James's vocabulary and theology, it always denotes physical illness.

c. The only other N.T. reference to the practice of anointing with oil (Mk. 6:13) is in relation to physical healing.

4. The person is so sick as to be "laid out." This is suggested by the fact he is to summon the elders to him, rather than go to them, and the fact the elders are to "pray *over* him."

5. The "elders of the church" are the leaders of the congregation who are spiritually mature Christians. They are described in the N.T. by three Greek words: *presbuteros*

(translated "elder" or rarely "presbyter"), *poimen* (translated "shepherd" or "pastor"), and *episkopos* (translated "overseer" or "bishop").

6. Olive oil is to be applied by the elders in conjunction with their praying. The oil in this case may serve as a sign or symbol that the sick person is being set apart for God's special attention and care or as an expression of faith that the sick person will be returned to normal.² It almost certainly is not mentioned here as a form of medical treatment. Though oil can be used medicinally, and was so used in the ancient world, it is unlikely that James is referring to a medicinal use because:

- a. Oil would not be good medicine for every illness.
- b. Anyone would be as suitable as the elders to apply a purely medicinal remedy (and would no doubt have already done so).
- c. James indicates that the prayer saves the sick, not the oil (either via innate healing properties or via some sacramental power).
- d. The anointing is "in the name of the Lord," which suggests something beyond the innate healing properties of the oil is involved.

7. The fact oil is probably not intended as medicine in this verse does not mean that it is wrong or unfaithful for Christians to use medicine when they are ill.

a. Paul told Timothy in 1 Tim. 5:23 to use wine medicinally because of his stomach and his frequent illnesses. Part of the goodness of the good Samaritan in the Lord's parable in Luke 10 was that he poured oil and wine on the wounds of the man who had been beaten by robbers. In 2 Ki. 20:7 (also Isa. 38:21) Isaiah prescribed a cake of figs be laid on Hezekiah's boil as a kind of poultice.

b. The idea that God works through medicine is nothing new. In chapter 38 of Sirach (a.k.a. Ecclesiasticus), a second century B.C. Jewish writing that is part of the apocrypha (or deuterocanonical writings), it states: "Honor the physician with the honor due him,

² As McGuiggan notes (in an email): Oil-anointing was a daily part of toiletry. It was only left off in times of stress, mourning, penitence and the like. It was a (non)visible marker that things were not "normal." Daniel in distress (ch 9) won't anoint himself, David while baby is in danger won't anoint himself, some Pharisees while fasting made a big deal out of not anointing. In contrast, people "normally" anointed themselves: David goes back to normality by anointing when he hears the baby has died, Christ urges his own to anoint themselves despite stress or whatever, and in Mark 6:13 the apostles anointed people they were about to heal miraculously (so the oil wasn't medicine). All that to say, that anointing a sick man with oil while praying for him was a sign of faith that the man was about to be healed. They were getting him ready for his restoration to the ranks of the normal. Today we'd press his suit, iron his shirt and shave him. In James the oil has no "immediately religious" or sacramental meaning--it's social and an expression of their faith. (It'd still be acceptable today to do this but it would be missing the point by following the text as if it were some religious procedure by which healing was assured.)

according to your need of him, for the Lord created him; . . . The Lord created medicines from the earth, and a sensible man will not despise them."

8. Verse 16 indicates that praying for the sick is not limited to the elders. The elders praying over the extremely ill is simply a specific case of healing prayer, which James generalizes in v. 16 into a principle of preventive medicine for the congregation. As Moo says, "His focus is no longer on the specific case that he mentioned in v. 14 (*Is any one of you sick?* . . .) but on the general need for the community to be involved regularly (the present tense of the imperative verb suggests this) in mutual confession and prayer as a way of treating cases of sickness that might arise." This shift from elders to believers in general shows that the healing power is in prayer, not in the elders.

9. Verse 15b shows that sickness *may be* related to sin. In other words, the person may be experiencing sickness because he is involved in sin.

a. We know from the Book of Job and from Jesus (e.g., Jn. 9:2-3) that not *all* afflictions are the product of sin, but that connection remains a possibility (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:27-30 - discipline by illness over eating the Lord's Supper sinfully).

b. Where sickness is the result of sin, that sin will be forgiven upon the sinner's confession of the sin and prayer for forgiveness (in which he presumably joins with the elders or the community). The communal aspect -- the public confession and corporate prayer for forgiveness and healing -- may be necessitated by the fact the sin is being disciplined by the Lord. The "confession of sin" in 1 Jn. 1:9 does not specify that it be public (though many scholars think that is implied).

c. So if I become ill (or, for that matter, experience any hardship), I need to examine my life honestly to see if the Lord is disciplining me. If I have fallen into a sin, I need to confess that sin to the church that we may pray as a community for forgiveness and healing.

10. James says in v. 15 that "the prayer of faith *will* save the one who is ill, and the Lord *will* raise him up." Yet, we know that Paul prayed three times for his "thorn in the flesh" to be removed but was not healed (2 Cor. 12:7-9). (Note that it was because of an illness that he first preached the gospel to the Galatians [Gal. 4:13-14].) And we know that he left Trophimus sick in Miletus (2 Tim. 4:20). Clearly it sometimes is not God's will to heal us physically. (The fact we all will die, unless the Lord returns before then, confirms the point.) So what's going on? How can James's apparently unconditional promise that God *will heal* one for whom the prayer of faith is offered be reconciled with the fact (from biblical testimony and personal experience) that God does not heal everyone for whom prayers are offered? Some possibilities:

a. It was understood that the "prayer of faith" includes an implied "not my will but yours be done." In other words, when James says God *will* heal, he means "assuming, of course, that it is God's will to do so." After all, it was James who just rebuked the wealthy believers for not recognizing that whether they lived or died depended on the will of

the Lord (4:13-16). While it is true that all prayers are subject to the sovereignty of God, it seems that James is saying more than simply the Lord *may* heal them if he chooses to do so. He seems to be assuring them that the Lord will heal them, at least normally.

b. James is promising his readers that God will (at least normally) heal them in response to their prayers, but this particular promise need not be extended beyond that time and group. It is certainly possible that the Spirit revealed to James God's intention to heal routinely in response to the prayers of James's audience, as part of God's public validation of the new Christian movement. God is sovereign, and he may have planned to work subsequently in a less striking fashion (i.e., healing less frequently), much as the work of the Spirit changed after he confirmed by miracles the divine nature of the church. (The key here is that Scripture itself suggests that the promise was not universal.)

c. Perhaps the "prayer of faith" to which James is referring is not just a prayer offered with confidence in God's existence, love, and supremacy, but a prayer offered with *divinely given* assurance that what one is asking is in fact within the will of the Lord (and thus will be granted -- 1 Jn. 5:14-15). In other words, it's a prayer of God-given confidence that the specific request will be granted rather than a prayer of confidence in God's general goodness and supremacy.

11. The power of prayer must not be underestimated. Elijah was a man, and look what God did in response to his prayers!

C. Encouragement to correct the erring (5:19-20)

¹⁹My brothers, if anyone among you should wander from the truth, and someone turns him back, ²⁰know that the one who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

1. James urges his readers to turn those who have wandered from the truth back to the right path, the right way of life. Those who had wandered into hostility, anger, favoritism, and various sins of division were in danger of condemnation.

2. If they are successful, they will deliver that erring brother from eternal death, covering (with atoning blood) a multitude of his sins.