**The blessing of trials** Text: James 1: 1-4

*(Scripture quotes from New King James version unless otherwise stated)*

Shortly after I was married we started attending an Anglican church in the city. The minister, Allan Blanch, led a Bible study in the manse opposite Sydney University in Glebe. I recall one of those studies being on James chapter 4. I recall it because the teaching was clear, brief, and succinct, and also practical. Someone has called James a ‘How to’ manual; ‘How to face trials’ is the first lesson. His analysis of this book includes five ‘How to…’ headings and twenty four ‘How to…’ subheadings! ‘James is a practical manual for vital Christians’. It could also be called a book on the works of faith- ‘Faith endures trials’, ‘Faith shows no partiality’, ‘Faith controls the tongue’, and so on. Where the apostle Paul in his letters begins with doctrine and ends with practical application, James jumps right into application, but we will find doctrine woven into the practical teaching of this little book of the NT.

This book of just five chapters is a letter, as indicated by the opening verse. As in Paul’s letters, we find the writer’s name and title, along with reference to the recipients. The greetings of this letter are limited to just one, ‘Greetings’. The writer identifies himself as ‘James, a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ’ (1:1). There are five men in the Bible called ‘James’, so who is this ‘James’? Two of Jesus’ disciples were called James; one was the brother of John and son of Zebedee, and the other the son of Alphaeus. John’s brother James died in AD44, the first apostle to be martyred, while little is known of the other disciple called James. Another James is the father of Judas, not Iscariot, and the fourth is James the Less, son of Mary who watched Jesus being crucified (Mark 15:40). The fifth James is the half-brother of Jesus who became a believer and leader of the Jerusalem church. He presided over the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, and welcomed Paul when he brought the collection to the Jerusalem church (Acts 21:18).

James refers to himself as, ‘a bondservant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ’ (1:1). As a servant ‘of God and of Jesus Christ’, James implies equality in the Godhead; he mentions the Spirit later in his letter (4:5). James claimed no more status for himself as the half-brother of Jesus than did Mary as the mother of Jesus. Both saw Jesus as their Lord and Messiah, meaning they were servants of Jesus Christ. Leaders or office-bearers in the church are also bondservants of Jesus Christ. It is an honour to be called to leadership in the house of God but also a great responsibility. James writes, ‘Let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment’ (3:1).

James writes to, ‘The twelve tribes which are scattered abroad’ (1:1). The nation of Israel consisted of twelve tribes, the descendants of the twelve sons of Jacob. But James was not writing to the Jews; he was writing to Christians, particularly Christians of Jewish background- as most in the Jerusalem church were. He was writing to the church as the new Israel of God (Gal 6:16). These predominantly Jewish Christians were scattered out of this city- the Greek word is ‘*diaspora*’. After the Jews stoned Stephen, ‘a great persecution arose against the church’, so the Christians fled to the regions of Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1)

As refugees, these Christians lived in poverty. They were both persecuted and poor, as is usually the case. Moreover, the initial sharing of all things within the church seems to have given way to a rich-poor division in the church (2:2). The world with all its pleasures and desirable things, often seeps into the thinking and conduct of Christians, and hence into the church. James has a strong word for such backsliding - he calls it adultery, spiritual adultery (4:4). He says such conduct is a sign of submission to Satan rather than to God. ‘Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord and he will lift you up’ is one of the key lessons of this letter (4:10). If you will not humble yourself, then the Lord may well humble you. Not all trials are for our correction, but when we face various trials we must learn from them and grow through them, to the glory of God.

So it is that James begins his letter on the subject of trials, telling us to face trials with joy, because they are a testing of our faith, having the purpose of moving us towards wholeness, completion or perfection.

**1. Trials and joy**

Our first response to trials or suffering is not usually one of joy or rejoicing. We don’t come home praising the Lord that we have just had a car accident, although we may be thankful that no one was injured- but what if they were? We don’t come home from the doctor praising God that we have just been diagnosed with cancer. Some Christians have the idea that if we praise God, and ‘in everything give thanks’ literally, that God will stop our suffering, but James does not say this- he does not teach ‘magic formulas’ or ‘fake’ praise. What he does teach is that God is in control, and that God has a purpose in allowing us to fall into various trials. ‘The suffering of believers is always under the providential control of a God who wants what is best for his people’. This is the reason James tells these Christians to ‘consider it pure joy when you fall into various trials’ (1:2). Peter also tells diaspora Jews not to be surprised when they suffer painful trials (1Peter 4:12).

James writes to ‘brethren’ or brothers and sisters in Christ who have been scattered abroad. They have been uprooted from their homes because of persecution, and are finding life difficult in a new place. They are probably longing to return to ‘normality’ and ‘security’, to being in control of their lives. James does not promise return or relief from suffering, but he does tell them they can have joy in the midst of their suffering. How can this be? Paul might have said, ‘grace and peace be with you’ but James says, ‘joy’. The word ‘joy’ naturally includes peace; it speaks of an inner peace and contentment that overflows into one’s outlook on life and one’s conduct. Paul refers to love, joy, and peace as fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22.

If our trials are by way of harassment, ridicule, or persecution, we may think of retaliating or taking vengeance, but if our hearts are filled with peace and joy such thoughts will not remain. We will commit ourselves in the hands of almighty God. We rightly look for justice, but know that God is judge (4:12, 5:9). For our part, we look to the Lord and listen to what he is saying to us.

Often our suffering is caused by our own foolishness, not by other people, even if we try to blame someone else. Often our suffering has no cause; we simply fall upon difficult times like Job. James casts the net wide in referring to trials of many kinds, as he focusses on our response to trials, not their source, their type, or on avoiding trials. Note that James says ‘when’ not ‘if’ you face trials. Jesus said, ‘In this world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world’ (John 16:33). James displays a thorough knowledge of the words of Jesus, particularly the Sermon on the Mount (cf. 5:12).

**2. Testing of faith and perseverance**

For the joy set before Him, Jesus endured the cross (Heb 12:2). Jesus suffered in this world, just as we do- and he had no sin! Jesus knew that God had a purpose in his suffering, namely our redemption. Jesus suffered unto death, even death on the cross, for our salvation. In his great love for us, and knowing the purpose of his suffering, Jesus endured the cross with joy. He also knew that God would reward his obedience in raising him from the dead to return to heavenly glory. While suffering is never for the purpose of paying for our own sins, or the sins of others, it is for our sanctification, for our growth and maturing in the precious faith which the Lord has given us.

Looking back to the OT, we see how the Lord allowed his covenant people to suffer when they turned away to follow other gods. They suffered oppression at the hands of their enemies, along with drought and disease. Through this suffering, God drew his people back to himself. We hear them crying to the Lord for mercy as they endured suffering. Can you remember crying to the Lord at a time of terrible suffering?

While our suffering may not be the direct outcome of our sin, it still serves to draw us nearer to the Lord. It is easy to wander away from the Lord, to get on the wrong path as it were, or maybe just give up and sit down on the path we are on. The Christian life is a journey or pilgrimage in which we will meet many obstacles; we will be tested time and again. James says that the testing of our faith produces perseverance or endurance. Testing serves to strengthen us for the next part of the journey. Testing serves to make us more and more like our Lord Jesus Christ.

James loves metaphors but it is Peter who provides a metaphor about the purpose of suffering as testing our faith. In referring to momentary suffering under various trials, Peter writes, ‘That the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honour , and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ’ (1Peter 1:7). Testing serves to purify our faith, to get rid of any dross or impediments. Testing does not produce faith but it produces perseverance, and it purifies the faith we have been given. To purify has the sense of perfecting, which is what James teaches in the next verse.

**3. Towards perfection or completeness**

When perseverance finishes its work we reach completion or perfection (1:4). Something that is complete ‘lacks nothing’; it is whole in every way. Not only will we become whole; we will become holy, reaching to the measure of the stature and fullness of Christ (Eph 4:13). Now can you see God’s purpose in allowing us to face trials and tribulations in this earthly life? They are inevitable anyway, but as believers we face trials differently to unbelievers. We face trials in the knowledge that God is in control, and that he is working all things together for our good. Trials bring us closer to God if we accept them and bear up under their weight.

Paul assures us that God will not allow us to be tested beyond what we are able to bear and will provide a way of escape (1Cor 10:13). James assures us that if we face trials with faith, our faith will be strengthened. He says that faith produces perseverance, and when perseverance has finished its work you will be perfect and complete. Paul says something similar in Romans 5:3-4 where he writes, ‘We also glory in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance, and perseverance character, and character hope’.

Our hope is heaven; our hope is to be found fully and finally in Christ. We will not attain perfection in this life but it is our hope, our sure and certain hope for the end of our life in this world. Jesus said, ‘You shall be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Mat 5:48). Paul did not see himself as having attained perfection but he pressed on toward the goal of perfection in Christ Jesus, and of the crown of righteousness (Phil 3:12, 14, 2Tim 4:8); James speaks of receiving the crown of life in verse 12.

Have you faced any trials of late? Are you facing a trial at the moment, maybe sickness, bereavement, disappointment, or even poverty? Has James shown you a new way of looking at this trial? There is a way to be patient and persevere in affliction and suffering. There is even a way to ‘count it all joy’ when you fall into some kind of trial. That way is found in looking to the Lord with a heart of faith. The Lord gives faith for this very purpose, that we might believe he is in control and that he will bring us through any and every trial to make us perfect and complete in the Lord Jesus Christ.

**Ask in faith for wisdom** Text: James 1: 5-8

When Adam and Eve sinned they cut themselves off from the wisdom of their Maker; they were left to walk in the darkness of worldly wisdom. James tells us the marks of worldly wisdom at the end of chapter 3: ‘Envy, self-seeking, confusion and every evil thing’. I am sure you will agree that the media’s reporting on our society confirms what James says. But you may not agree that you lack the wisdom to live in a way that pleases God. Do you always act wisely? How do you react to trials? What does James say in 3:17 about wisdom from God? ‘Peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy, and good spirits’. Do you find James a bit intimidating? Some like being religious, but do not let their religion affect the things they do in life. Apparently 44% of Australians say they are religious, but how many of these live in the fear of God, and with godly wisdom?

James teaches about active faith, about faith that works. Is your faith working? Last time we learnt about faith and trials, faith that perseveres when tested. Just as fire refines precious metals, so trials refine and strengthen our faith. If there is no faith our works will be burned up: ‘without faith it impossible to please God’ (Heb 11:6).

Today we learn about faith and wisdom; without wisdom we will bear no good fruit in our life (3:17). Our sub headings: ‘A lack of wisdom’, ‘Ask of God’ and ‘Ask in faith’.

**1. A lack of wisdom**

Since we are born in sin and cut off from God because of our sin, we are cut off from the source of wisdom. Many, including the dictionary, say wisdom comes from experience, but that depends on your experience, and on your definition of wisdom; what wisdom has Putin learned from his experiences! A lot of old people lack wisdom. Most agree that knowledge is important in life, and that with knowledge comes wisdom; we agree with the first premise but not necessarily the second. We send our children to school to gain knowledge but does this make them wise. Our educators think so; they keep teaching that drugs are harmful but what do we see? When it comes to cannabis and alcohol the experts don’t even agree on what to teach, so where does that leave the children?

Our ‘progressive society’ focusses on knowledge but leaves children to gain wisdom by experience, which can be dangerous. The Bible teaches us knowledge and wisdom. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of both knowledge and wisdom (Prov 1:7, 9:10). In the Bible we find the truth when it comes to knowledge, not the corrupted knowledge taught by the theory of evolution. The Bible teaches godly wisdom, wisdom given by our Maker. Fear of God or faith in God opens our hearts to asking for and receiving this wisdom.

The apostle Paul writes of the Greeks seeking after wisdom, which is commendable compared to unbelievers in our society, but the Greeks were condemned by Paul as being foolish in the eyes of God (1Cor 1:22). They made their own gods; dead gods are not able to impart wisdom. So the wisdom of the Greeks came from themselves as worldly wisdom. They had no fear of, or faith in, the true and living God. Paul reminds us that in Christ Jesus we see the wisdom of God; he became wisdom for us from God (1Cor 1:30). As the Son of God, Jesus grew in wisdom, with people asking, ‘Where did this man get this wisdom (Luke 2:40, Mark 13:34). Jesus spoke about the wise man building his house on the rock, and of the wise and foolish virgins at the wedding.

James knew what Jesus taught about wisdom, and also what is in the wisdom books of the OT. The book of James is often compared to the book of Proverbs in the OT. Wisdom is there personified as ‘lady wisdom’, warning a young man about the dangers of this world, particularly of alliances with wicked men or seductive women. Hence, fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of God’s commands essential.

**2. Ask of God**

If we were born with wisdom we would not need to ask God for wisdom, would we! If we could get wisdom by just living in this world we would not need to ask God for it, would we! Wisdom is not the same as experience; even old people lack wisdom, according to what James defines as wisdom (3:16). It is said that, ‘Man’s greatest need is to know what is his greatest need’. We might also say, ‘The wise man realises his need for wisdom’. When James writes, ‘If any of you lacks wisdom’ please do not exclude yourself! We all need wisdom in facing trials, and in making all sorts of decisions. Wisdom to believe in Jesus in the first place is our biggest decision; thankfully God gives us the faith to believe and make this decision, when we ask him.

In his sermon on the mount Jesus said, ‘Ask, and it will be given to you… for everyone who asks receives’ (Mat 7:7-8). He spoke of God being like a father giving good things to his children. God wants you to have wisdom, but you need to ask him first; God is not a bully! Jesus later told his disciples, ‘If you ask anything in my name I will do it’ (John 14:14); of course, ‘anything’ is what is good for us as determined by our loving Father.

James believed what Jesus said, and teaches us to do the same. He assures us that God is able to give - ‘it will be given him’- and that God is willing- ‘He gives liberally and without reproach’ (1:5). Some translate ‘liberally’ as ‘generously’; the Greek has the sense of a single mind. James is highlighting God’s ‘undivided intent to give us those gifts we need to please him’. And he gives ‘without finding fault’; He is not looking for a reason not to give us what we ask for.

Eve fell into Satan’s trap of believing that God was not ‘single-eyed’ or acting with integrity when he gave the command about the tree in the garden. There are still people who think that God does not always act with integrity and is sometimes malevolent towards them. Let no such thoughts enter your heart or mine!

**3. Ask in faith**

This leads to James teaching us about the way to ask God for wisdom, or anything for that matter. On the positive side, we must ask in faith (1:6). Faith is the same as believing. Faith is God’s gift to us by his Spirit. With the Spirit dwelling in our hearts we can, and must, ask in faith. We ask believing that God can and will give what we ask for. Jesus said, ‘Whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them’- Jesus qualifies this promise saying, ‘and does not doubt’ (Mark 11:23, 24).

We ask God in our prayer. James is big on prayer, we might say, on asking God for things, but not always physical things. Here he tells us to ask for wisdom; remember how King Solomon asked for wisdom and God gave him wisdom. James also tells us to pray when we are suffering, or when we are sick. He reminds us about Elijah praying for the rain to stop, and it did. He also condemns fights and quarrels which arise when people want things saying, ‘You do not have because you do not ask’ (4:2).

Do you sometimes feel that you have nothing to pray about? Maybe you have all the things you want- although most people are never satisfied with the things they have. Have you ever asked for wisdom? Have you ever asked the Lord to increase your faith? Maybe you have stopped praying because God is not answering your prayers. Do you think prayer is a waste of time? I am sure James will help you get back to regular and fervent praying. He is now going to tell us one reason we do not get what we ask for.

**4. Ask without doubting**

Asking in faith means no doubting when we pray; this is the negative side of James’ teaching on prayer and asking for wisdom. Faith cannot coexist with continual doubting. What is doubting? This is when we think God is not able to give what we ask for or that he is not willing to give. We are saying God is not omnipotent and/or is not love. If we come to God doubting his power and his goodness, he will not give us what we ask for because it will not be for his glory.

What would you think of a father who sometimes withholds good things from his son, or who gives his son a stone when he asked for bread? (Mat 7:9). If the son expressed doubts about his father’s readiness to give him what is good, you would not think highly of that father, would you? So what will people think about your heavenly Father if you express doubts about his readiness to give you good things?

In the wisdom of the Psalms, the double-minded man is condemned (Ps 119:113). A person with a divided heart is not fit to be a disciple of Jesus- look at the rich young ruler! The divided-heart man contrasts with the single-hearted or generous God- remember the Greek word (*haplos*) meaning ‘single’ in verse 5; here we have a ‘*di*’ word. Doubters or people who change their mind may be acceptable or even praised in our society, but not in God’s eyes. I recall the atheist, Peter Singer, being shocked that so many in the USA did not believe in evolution. He went over to educate them and change their minds, but failed. We still hear arrogant people saying they will change our minds about something. Jesus will not have followers who change their minds about him, people who are in love with him one day and out of love the next. They become ‘out of love’ because they start loving the world- in chapter 4 we will come to teaching on spiritual adultery.

James likes to illustrate his teaching with metaphors or similes. We come to the first of these in verse 6. The person who doubts when he asks for something from God is ‘like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind’ (1:6). I am about to go on a river cruise, but I have never been on an ocean cruise. I think that the rolling of the ship in a storm might make me sick in the stomach. James does not go this far in his illustration, but you get the picture of this up and down person, eager to pray one day but reluctant to pray the next, eager to be in church one week but reluctant to go the next.

As believers, we have a rock to stand on, an anchor for our souls, so let us stand firm on the rock of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus used the illustration of the wise man building his house on the rock, referring to the person who hears his words and obeys them (Mat 7:24f). A person lacking in faith or not exercising their faith, gets blown about by feelings, and by things they see or hear from others.

A person who lives out the faith they have been given, and who finds in Jesus Christ the source of all wisdom, will not go looking in other places for wisdom or for things that they think will profit them. They will walk by faith, not by sight, on the path set before them by Jesus Christ. Freedom rather than bondage is promised you who, in faith, ask for wisdom to live in the way that pleases God and brings glory to his holy name. ‘Follow me’, said Jesus, ‘and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free’ (John 8:32).

**Poverty and plenty in perspective** Text: James 1: 9-12

We often hear the sarcastic comment, ‘He is living on another planet or ‘What planet are you living on?’ As believers people sometimes think we are living on another planet because of the things we do or don’t do. When I resigned my job in the government to go to India as a missionary my colleagues were bemused. ‘What on earth is he doing?’ They were fine people, but their thinking was only of this earth and material things. Believers have a different perspective in life, a heavenly perspective. We are not driven by the lusts of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life- not if we are obeying God’s word (1John 2:16). We are, in a sense, living on another planet if we are citizens of heaven. We are, at least, living in another kingdom, a kingdom ruled by our Lord Jesus and not by ‘lord me’.

**1. Another view**

James, like Jesus and like the apostle Paul, urges us to view our lives from a heavenly perspective. Jesus saw firsthand the pull of possessions in the rich young ruler who came to him. And in his sermon on the mount he made it clear that we cannot serve two masters (Mat 7:24); letting money become our master means letting God go as our master and Lord. If we want both God and money as masters we are being double minded, an ‘unstable in all our ways’, as James has just said (1:8).

Earthly people make the pursuit of money the most important thing in their lives, more important than God and even family. They make ‘financial problems’ an excuse for leaving a marriage, or for turning to gambling, alcohol or drugs. We all need money for food and clothes and shelter, but does not Jesus promise to provide for us (Mat 6:31-33). Do we really believe his promise, or do we think like earthly people. What does James say right here in this chapter? ‘Every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father of lights’ (1:17).

The book of Proverbs says a lot about riches and poverty, and so does James in this little book of wisdom. The sayings of Agur in Proverbs 30:8-9 may have resonated with James: “Give me neither poverty nor riches… lest I be full and deny you and say, ‘who is the Lord?’, or lest I be poor and steal, and profane the name of my God”. Riches and poverty are relative of course, although from a biblical perspective, if we have food, clothes and shelter we can, and should, be content.

James, as we have noted, is writing to Christians who had been displaced because of persecution. Most refugees are poor, but even in a refugee camp there are people ready to exploit fellow suffers. The early church was marked by a sharing of possessions- ‘Nor was there anyone who lacked’ (Acts 4:34). James may have seen this spontaneous sharing of possessions in the Jerusalem church. But this does not mean every believer had the same possessions- they were not socialists or communists. They were driven by a love for Jesus and his teaching. They were driven by a new perspective on life, by a focus on the return of Jesus in a new, heavenly, and eternal kingdom.

In a sense, this perspective is the outcome of receiving wisdom, wisdom from above. And so James teaches about poverty and riches as examples of where heavenly or godly wisdom should be applied. This teaching also fits into the overall subject of trials, which he concludes in verse 12- despite the division of verses suggested in many Bibles and commentaries.

**2. A word for the lowly**

James firstly addresses the lowly or humble brother in the church. He tells this brother to take pride in his high position. The world will treat this person as unimportant or as a ‘nobody’, and sadly, in the church this may also be the case. I have been in a church where the front seat was kept for the local politician who attended the church; this matter will come up in chapter 2 where James deals with partiality or favouritism.

It is easy for worldly status, which is often based on wealth, to be carried into the church. But in the church, where Christ is King, it is Christ who determines one’s status. And remember what Jesus said about little children: ‘Let the children come to me… for of such is the kingdom of God’ (Luke 18:16). ‘Whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven’ (Mat 18:4). The humble or lowly brother is not unlike a little child. He or she may go unnoticed in society, and even in the church, but never in the eyes of the Lord.

James tells the lowly brother to ‘glory in his exaltation’, or in the NIV, to ‘take pride in his high position’ (1:9). The rich person may have a high position in the eyes of man, but the lowly or poor person has a high position in the eyes of God. He or she may rank as nothing in the kingdoms of this world, but in the kingdom of God things are totally different. James, like Paul, urges us to look at things, including our own life, from God’s perspective, from the perspective of heaven and eternity (2Cor 4:18).

This is especially important when we face trials. When the apostles were locked up and beaten by the Jewish leaders they, ‘rejoiced that they were worthy to suffer shame for His name’ (Acts 5:41). Their focus was on Christ and his name, not on their comfort or reputation in this world. What James said about counting it all joy when you suffer trials was certainly true of the apostles. It can, and should be, true of you also if you feel that no one notices you or respects you, or if you feel unloved. The Lord notices you and you are precious to the Lord. Did he not send his precious Son to the cross because of his love for you? No matter what people may say or do, never doubt God’s love for you!

**3. A word to the rich**

After addressing the lowly brother, James turns to the rich, who we presume is a brother or fellow believer also (1:10). Because of the contrast with the rich, we also presumed the lowly brother to be relatively poor (cf. 2:3, 15, 5:4). Like Jesus, James expresses concern for the rich when it comes to entering the kingdom of God (Luke 18:24). Being rich does not exclude anyone from the kingdom of God, of course; rich and poor are found in the church and in the kingdom of God. But the rich person should take pride ‘in his humiliation’ or ‘in his low position’ (1:10). He or she must not demand, or be given, a position in the church based on their riches or their status in the world. All such thinking, all pride based on wealth must be abandoned in the church where Christ in King.

Master and slave stand as equals in the church of God- remember Paul’s letter to Philemon about accepting back his runaway, but now converted, slave. In my reading I was reminded of Negro spirituals, a few of which are still sung in the church. Even within a Christian community, these slaves did not see what the apostle called for with the Christian master, Philemon. But what they learnt from their difficult lives was to focus on heaven, on the freedom and the blessings to be enjoyed in heaven. This focus is reflected in the gospel songs they wrote and sang, a focus not so marked in modern worship songs.

As James continues speaking to rich people, he reminds them of the brevity of life in this world. If the poor tend to focus on heaven, the rich tend to focus on this world, on accumulating more riches and more of the things this world offers. But as the psalmist points out, the rich cannot take their riches with them when they die (Ps 49). Death is the great leveller. In fact, death may see a great reversal if the rich man does not heed godly wisdom- remember the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16.

James, like Peter, was familiar with the words of the prophet Isaiah: ‘All flesh is like grass… the grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever’ (Isa 40:6-8, 1Peter 1:24). He adopts this metaphor in reminding the rich that, while they may glory in their riches, this glory, this flourishing, will come to an end, and maybe sooner that they think. James is not really referring to the judgment but simply to the end of life in this world, or simply the end of what riches can buy. He speaks of the rich fading away even as he goes about his business (1:11, cf. 4:13). He will fade away like the grass or the flower when the summer sun and the hot desert wind blow across the land. The flower that is beautiful one day, withers and falls to the ground the next. The wise person will consider this reality, a reality that the rich person tends to forget.

As a pastor I enjoy ministering to children and to the elderly. In kindergarten, children of the rich and the poor play together without concern as to the status of their parents in society. In the nursing home it is much the same; one old woman looks the same as another whether they are rich or poor. Despite state funerals, given to so many these days, everyone ends up in the same place, namely the grave. The wise person will consider this truth and listen to the psalmist who says: ‘So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom’ (Ps 90:12). Listening to the Lord, and to James, the wise person will lay up treasure in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal’ (Mat 5:2-3, 6:20) - and where stock markets do not crash!

**4. Crown of life**

In terms of enduring trials and pressing on in the faith, the apostle Paul pictures a soldier, an athlete, and a farmer (2Tim 2:1-6). James uses the picture of a farmer in chapter 5: ‘See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth… You also be patient’. He also speaks of the crown of life here in verse 12. Paul speaks of athletes being crowned when they finish the race. When James speaks of a crown it is probably this laurel wreath of victory rather than a royal crown of gold. The laurel wreath was of little intrinsic value but meant a lot to the winner, especially if given by the king or emperor. The ‘crown of life ‘will be given by the Lord to ‘those who love Him’ (1:12). The angel or messenger of the Lord speaks of the ‘crown of life’ being given to those who are ‘faithful until death’ (Rev 2:10). Love for Jesus is shown by trusting him and obeying his commands (John 14:23). The double-minded person will not receive anything from the Lord (1:7).

James began his letter telling us that trials that come our way are for the testing of our faith and, in fact, for the strengthening of our faith. We can and should face trials with joy, knowing that the Lord will bring us through, and that if we persevere we will become perfect and complete. Our response as believers will not be natural, or like that of the unbeliever. We will need wisdom from God to see trials as a blessing from God. We must ask for this wisdom, believing God is good and will give us wisdom.

Poor people seemingly face more trials than the rich, but James warns the rich not to let money replace the Lord as their master. Riches are very uncertain- they can easily disappear- and have no value at death. In fact, life is very uncertain, so let the rich as well as the poor focus on the Lord and on the crown of life that the Lord will give to those who in faith and love persevere to the end, ‘for the coming of the Lord is at hand’ (5:8).

**Temptation and God** Text: James 1: 13-18

When Eve was tempted to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil there is no mention of her being hungry as such. ‘She saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and desirable to make one wise’ (Gen 3:6). When Jesus of Nazareth, the seed of that woman, was very hungry after forty days in the desert, he was similarly tempted by the devil but answered, ‘It is written, man shall not live by bread alone but by every word of God’ (Luke 4:4). Both were tempted but only Eve sinned by disobeying God’s command. Temptation is not in and of itself sin, but yielding to temptation and disobeying God’s command, is sin.

Here in verse 13 of chapter 1, James speaks about temptation. He began this chapter teaching about trials- ‘Count it all joy when you fall into various trials’. Here he speaks about desires, and about being dragged into sin- we do not fall into temptation and sin! Being tempted, we might ‘fall’ in the sense of committing sin- we refer to the temptation and sin of Eve and Adam as ‘the Fall’. The Greek word is the same for trial and temptation, but there is a difference in the nature and the source of trials compared to temptations. Trials do not come from the heart or from desires of the flesh- illness, bereavement, disasters and even poverty come upon us in life. When James tells us to persevere under trials, the understanding is that God is testing our faith. God allows trials for the purpose of testing our faith. Faith is a matter of the heart of course, so our response is from the heart, but the trial is from outside. Temptation is different, as James explains here in verses 13-16.

**1. Temptation and God**

Temptation never has it source or origin in God. ‘God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He himself tempt anyone’ (1:13). Jesus was tempted but this was because he took on human flesh and a human nature. He was made like us in every way in order to suffer and die as our representative. He was our High Priest who made ‘propitiation for the sins of the people’ (Heb 2:17). As our High Priest, he is able to sympathise with us in our weaknesses; he was tempted as we are but remained without sin (Heb 4:15). Jesus suffered terrible trials during his short life on earth, but he endured unto death, even death on the cross, without sin. As a man he also suffered temptation, but he never yielded to this temptation; he recognised Satan’s hand and told him to get lost (Mat 16:23).

However, God the creator cannot be tempted. God is absolutely holy and cannot look upon sin. It would be illogical for God to tempt anyone to sin because sin would mean their removal from his presence. God’s desire, as we see in the cross and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ, is to bring people into his presence. So let no one say, ‘God tempted me and caused me to sin’. This would be utter foolishness.

**2. Temptation and my heart**

So where does temptation come from? James has an answer to this question that is consistent with what Jesus teaches in Matthew 15:19: ‘For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness and blasphemies’. James says, ‘Each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed’ (1:14). Temptations come from within whereas trials come from without. Temptations arise in the heart and, apart from arguing that because God made me he is responsible for my lusts and weakness of the flesh, I am responsible for my temptations and how I respond to them; people who blame God do not usually call God their Maker. Besides, God made us perfect; what happened to Eve in the garden was not God tempting her!

With Eve, and with Jesus, we saw that it was Satan who tempted them. If Satan tempted them it could not be God tempting them. We are reminded of the Pharisees accusing Jesus of doing good works by the power of Satan- a contradiction in terms. Satan is a liar and a murderer (John 8:44); he tempts us to all manner of evil, which is why we are told to resist him in the name of Jesus (1Peter 5:8-9). James also tells us to, ‘Resist the devil and he will flee from you’ (4:7), but does not mention the devil or Satan here in chapter 1- so we do not have a subheading, ‘temptation and Satan’!

While the devil can and does tempt us, he cannot make us sin. Sin is always our responsibility and our choice. With God’s help we can resist temptation, as Jesus did. Note that Jesus knew the Holy Scriptures and quoted them to the devil. How good are you at quoting Scripture to the devil when he tempts you?

James draws upon two metaphors to teach us about temptation. Firstly, he speaks of being drawn or dragged away by desires or lusts, and enticed (1:14). Temptation is like bait. Bait is designed to deceive the fish into biting the hook and getting caught; it is designed to attract fish to their death- note the word ‘deceived’ in verse 16. So it is with temptation of the flesh- when the bait is cast by Satan and you take it, you are dragged away, ‘hook, line, and sinker’.

If James was reading the book of Proverbs he would have read about the prostitute trying to lure the young man to her house; ‘Her house is the way to hell, descending to the chambers of death’ (Prov 7:27). In the next metaphor, James speaks of death being the outcome when temptation is not resisted but is allowed to run its course (1:15). Peter refers to false teachers with eyes full of adultery, enticing unstable souls (2Peter 2:14). He reminds us of Balaam and the incident of Baal of Peor in Numbers 25; the women of Moab seduced the Israelite men as they waited to cross into the Promised Land. The bait is taken because the flesh is weak. Jesus reminds us of this weakness of the flesh, telling his disciples to, ‘Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation’ (Mat 26:41).

The second metaphor is that of birth. James speaks of desire or lust conceiving and giving birth to sin; and sin, when it is full grown, brings forth death (1:15). Here we see three stages: lust, sin, death. James is not just talking about sexual temptation and sin, but this is obviously one area of the lusts of the flesh. King David gazed upon Bathsheba taking a bath when he should have been out with his army. He saw and he lusted and he sinned; the lust of the flesh and of the eyes (1John 2:16). Desire conceived and gave birth to sin, literally in this case. The sin grew, with David becoming guilty of murder and death. With Eve, her lust for the beautiful but forbidden fruit, and her taking of this fruit, brought death to us all: desire, sin, and death. We might contrast Joseph who fled for his life from the wife of Potiphar. He resisted the devil, and saw him flee from him (4:47), although not without subsequent trials. He fled temptation and endured the trial.

**3. The Father of lights**

Verse 16 sums up James’ warning about temptation; ‘Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren’. Addressing ‘beloved brethren’ usually introduces a new section, which it does here, while not forgetting his lesson on temptation. Remember, God tempts no one because he is holy and good. God is good and does good (Ps 119:68). He never tempts us to sin, or gives us bad things (Mat 7:11); he only ever gives good things. He gives us wisdom when we ask, and also gives us life. ‘Every good and perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights’ (1:17). God is in heaven, so these gifts, like wisdom, are pictured as coming from above (3:17). Referring to ‘good gifts’ and ‘perfect gifts’ seems like repetition but they are different words, and there is nothing wrong with repetition anyway.

Referring to God as the ‘Father of lights’ is not a term we are familiar with, although Jesus called himself the light of the world (John 8:12). Does ‘the Father of lights’ point to God creating light when he created the universe? When James goes on, ‘with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning’, we again struggle to understand what he is referring to. When God created light he made light and dark or day and night. He put the sun in the sky to govern the light, and also the moon and the stars. But for all the variations in light, and in many other things in the creation, God remains unchanged as the ‘Father of lights’. God is the uncreated, all-powerful, creator, worthy of our trust and our worship.

Some think this verse may have been some sort of creed used in the early church, which would help explain what, for us, is unusual wording. Even so, we love this verse and refer to it often, along with Romans 8:28: ‘We know all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose’.

As creator, God made us, of course; he made us in his image to worship him and glorify his holy name. But the reference here in verse 18 to Him bringing us forth by the word of truth, points to the new birth, to our rebirth as the children of God. James has just used conception and birth as a metaphor for temptation and sin. He now speaks of ‘my beloved brethren’ who are believers in the family of God. God, by his own determined purpose, and by the word of truth which is Jesus Christ our Lord, gave us new birth into eternal life. We are his adopted sons and daughters through this new birth in Christ Jesus. This is the gospel we believe and the gospel that we preach. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. He is the living word or ‘*logos*’, spoken of by the apostle John: ‘The word became flesh’. ‘We were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God’ (John 1:14, 14).

Speaking of gifts, God’s greatest gift is life, eternal life in Jesus Christ. While we are personally responsible for believing, just as we are personally responsible for sinning, James agrees with Paul who writes, ‘We were dead in trespasses and sins’, and that it was while we were dead in sin that God, ‘made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)’ (Eph 2:1,5). We did not give new birth to ourselves. It was God who ‘chose to give us birth through the word of truth’ (1:18NIV). This is the doctrine of grace taught in the Reformed faith.

James concludes with another somewhat unusual reference to being ‘a kind of firstfruits of His creatures’ (1:18). The idea of firstfruits takes us back to the OT and laws of tithes and offerings. The people of Israel brought the firstfruits of their harvest to the house of God, in thankful anticipation of a good harvest. In the NT, Paul refers to a man called Epaenetus as ‘the firstfruits of Achaia in Christ’ (Rom 16:5), and the household of Stephanus in the same way (1Cor 16:15). James is referring to the church as a kind of firstfruits. The church will continue to grow as God brings in the harvest of men and women for his glory.

There is a wider aspect to this firstfruits reference, indicated by the words ‘firstfruits of His creatures’ (1:18). This word points to creation in its broadest terms. It points to what Paul writes about in Romans 8:22: ‘For we know the whole creation groans and labours with birth pangs together until now’. The creation is waiting for the revealing of the sons of God. It was man through his sin that brought corruption and death to the whole creation. It is through the redemption of man that God will deliver the creation from bondage into the glorious liberty of the children of God (Rom 8:21), into the new heavens and the new earth.

**Doers and not just hearers of the word** Text: James 1: 19-27

Do you know the children’s chorus about the wise man who built his house on the rock and the foolish man who built his house on the sand? Who is the wise man? Jesus said, ‘Whoever hears these sayings of mine and does them is like a wise man who built his house on the rock’ (Matt 7:24). We cannot claim to be followers of Jesus if we are not listening to his words and doing what he says. When a woman praised Jesus for bringing blessing to his mother, he assured her: ‘More than that, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it!’ (Luke 11:28). Jesus does not have sentimental followers, or even religious followers; he has followers who listen to his word and obey what he commands (John 14:23).

In this chapter James has given us practical advice or wisdom about facing trials and temptation. God gives wisdom to you when you ask him. God gives you good gifts, so do not covet what belongs to others; desires give birth to sin, and sin to death. In verse 18 he reminds us that we are born again of the Spirit of God or ‘brought forth by the word of truth’ that we might to please and glorify God. The ‘word of truth’ we understand as the gospel of Jesus Christ: Jesus is the ‘*logos*’ and the truth. In the following verses, the verses we are looking at today, James draws practical lessons, from the fact that as believers, the word is implanted in our hearts (1:21). He may be reflecting on what Jeremiah says about the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34: ‘I will put my laws in their minds and write it on their hearts’.

More of this teaching shortly. For now, let us see that there is a thread running through this letter; it is not just a collection of wise sayings even if it looks a bit like the book of Proverbs. My NKJ version has a new section heading at verse 21 but we will ignore this. ‘Be doers of the word and not hearers only’ (1:22) is the key verse, but beginning from verse 19 we have the subheadings: ‘Avoid anger’, ‘Accept and obey the word’, ‘Analogy of a mirror’ and ‘Analysis of religion’.

**1. Avoid anger**

The words, ‘Knowing, my beloved brethren’, indicate a new section in the letter, but there is a connection to the previous sections as indicated in the subheading in our NKJV, ‘Qualities needed in trials’. Trials test our faith- we will press on or we will give up. We will patiently endure or we will complain, as the people did in the desert with Moses. We will show the patience of Job or we will show the anger of his wife.

The Christians to whom James was writing this letter may have fled Jerusalem because of persecution from Jews. Were they angry with these Jews? There were also divisions within this Christian community between rich and poor. In chapter 4 James refers to fights among them over worldly things and pleasures. Christians can get angry for all sorts of reasons, and there is a place for ‘righteous anger’, but anger or wrath is usually detrimental to our walking by faith, and ‘does not produce the righteousness of God’ (1:20).

While ‘the righteousness of God’ often refers to regeneration, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe (Rom 3:22), it can also refer to a way of life- ‘the just (righteous) shall live by faith’ (Hab 2:4). ‘What does the law require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God’ (Mic 6:8). Jesus told his hearers to ‘exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees’ (Mat 5:20).

‘In your anger do not sin’ warns the apostle Paul (Eph 4:26). James also warns about the dangers of anger (1:20). A sin that easily arises from anger comes from the tongue: evil words, oaths, slander, lies and blasphemies. We do not accept what psychologists say about anger, namely that emotions must be let out and not bottled up. With God’s help we can, and must, control our emotions, and bring them into line with God’s word and will. Angry words can lead to angry actions, like violence and even murder (cf. Mat 15:17).

James urges us to be slow to speak and swift to hear. We have gone the reverse, from anger to hearing, but James begins with hearing or listening. Listening is most important in all relationships and all communication. It is especially important in our relationship with the Lord- which is where ‘the word’ comes in. Obviously, we cannot listen while speaking. ‘A person of knowledge spares his words… even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace’ (Prov 17:27, 28).

Being slow to speak reduces the likelihood of saying things that hurt others, things that we will regret, things that do ‘not produce the righteousness of God’; words once spoken cannot be taken back. James writes a whole chapter on the dangers of the tongue. For now, he focusses on hearing the word of God and then of doing it in a broader sense, although the tongue features again in verse 26.

**2. Accept and obey God’s word**

‘But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags’ (Isa 64:6). The prophet pictures our sins, and even our good works, as filthy rags. Being born again is pictured as removing filthy old rags and putting on clean new clothes- we put on the righteousness of Christ. As part of our sanctification we are told to ‘put off’ the old man with his deeds: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy and filthy language’ (Col 3:8, 9, Eph 4:31). Paul speaks of bad language as ‘grieving the Holy Spirit of God by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption’ (Eph 4:30). James tells us to put off all moral filth and abundance of wickedness, and humbly put on or accept the implanted word (1:21).

As mentioned, this reflects what Jeremiah says: ‘I will write [my law] on their hearts’ (Jer 31:33). In effect, we have new hearts, moved by the Spirit to enable us to obey the word. All who believe in Jesus Christ are given the Holy Spirit who reminds us of all that Jesus spoke (John 14:26). The ‘Spirit of truth’ will operate with the implanted word of truth in our hearts to guide us into the way of truth and righteousness in Jesus Christ. When James writes, ‘Which is able to save your souls’, he is again referring to sanctification, to enduring trials until the completion of our salvation. We are already saved in the sense of justification, but this is not the end. The end or finish line and the prize is yet to come (Phil 3:14).

It is important, indeed essential, that we hear the word because, ‘Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God’ (Rom 10:17). But again, hearing and believing in Jesus is not the end; it is just the beginning of the journey or pilgrimage that is the Christian life. The word of God remains as a lamp to our feet and a light to our path all the days of our life in this world (Ps 119:105).

You may have seen Christians desperately clinging to their Bible as they were taken into custody by the Nazis or the Communists. Even as their clothes were ripped from them, they clung to their Bible. What a contrast to some Christians today! - take their Bible away and they won’t even notice! Those clinging to their Bible probably knew much of it by heart anyway, so even if pages were ripped from their Bible they had the words firmly planted in their heart. Moreover, they would be men and women who put into practice what they heard and read, like Corrie ten Boon who hid Jews from murdering Nazis.

In his parable of the sower, Jesus speaks of those who hear the word: Some hear and do not understand. Some hear and receive it with joy, but it does not take root so they stumble when trials and persecutions come. Some hear and receive the word, but it gets choked and their lives are unfruitful. To be fruitful, we must hear and understand, and be doers of the word. Trials make us strong, like the plant with deep roots. Or, to change the metaphor, ‘practice makes perfect’. There is no place in the church for those who do not practice what they preach.

**3. Analogy of a mirror**

James has his own analogy for the person who hears the word but fails to do or practice it. Such a person is like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror, goes away, and immediately forgets what he saw (1:23,24). Mirrors in those days were made of polished metal so the reflection was not good, but the point of this simile is that we see our face which we would not otherwise see; imagine living without a mirror! I remember trying to shave without a mirror!

The mirror enables us to see ourselves as we are - but only on the outside. The mirror reveals our face, and shows us what we look like to the world. But it does not show what we look like to God, and does not really show everything about us to the world. God sees our hearts, and people see beyond our appearance also, especially as we get closer to them. It is the word of God that we must look into in order to see our heart. The word of God pierces our hearts like a laser, and reveals the truth of who we are in the eyes of God (Heb 4:12).

As James makes the point about continually looking into the word of God and not forgetting what we see, and not forgetting to act upon what we see, he refers to the ‘perfect law of liberty’ (1:25). This is not the law of Moses as such, but the law of Moses and all the law of God, as it is interpreted and fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Luke 24:44). In Christ everything is complete or fulfilled, and we are complete in him (Col 2:9-10). The law of Christ is the law of liberty or freedom. Jesus said, ‘If you abide in my word you are my disciples, and you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free’ (John 8:31-32).

Using the image of the vine, Jesus said, ‘If you abide in me and my word abides in you’, you will be a fruitful disciple (John 15:7-8). James speaks of being blessed in what we do when we look intently into the word of God, and continue in it or live out in our lives what we see and hear- his words are, ‘be a doer of the work’ (1:25).

Moses specifically warned the people not to forget the Lord, ‘who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage’ (Deut 6:12). We read that they went on to forget the Lord again and again, and too many Christians have gone on to forget the Lord Jesus and his death in the cross as the propitiation for their sins. As a result, they are missing out on the blessings that are ours in the Lord Jesus Christ.

**Religion** Text: James 1: 26-27

Anyone who believes in God is called ‘religious’ these days; it has become a term of contempt among secular humanists despite the ‘religious zeal’ with which they pursue their humanistic agendas. As followers of Jesus, we tend to avoid this term, but here it is in the Bible. It is here in the sense for which we avoid the term, namely that of an outward show of piety or religiosity. The Pharisees were renowned for doing good works in order to be seen (Mat 6:1-4). But Jesus called them hypocrites because their piety did not include looking after widows and orphans- ‘You devour widow’s houses and for a pretence make long prayers’ (Mat 23:14). Quoting the prophet Isaiah he said, ‘They honour me with their lips but their heart is far from me’ (Mat 15:8, Isa 29:13). Saul, who became Paul, was a Pharisee who belonged to ‘the strictest sect of our religion’ (Acts 26:5). He was strict about circumcision, about fasting, about prayer, about keeping the law, and about persecuting the church. This is the context in which James writes.

James was writing to Christian Jews who had fled Jerusalem because of poverty and persecution. But the Christian community was not static; some were getting rich and forgetting about the poor. Some were forgetting their roots in the gospel and starting to focus on worldly things. Others, it seems, were focussing on faith to the degree that they were forgetting to live a life of faith, a life which means seeing the needs of neighbours. James has just finished encouraging his readers to be doers of the word and not hearers only (1:22).

James begins his brief analysis of true religion with a negative. This negative involves the tongue. Performance of rituals, and even offering God praise and prayer, means nothing if the mouth is later allowed to spew all manner of filth, lies, and slander. Anger often leads to an uncontrolled tongue, as James said back in verse 20: ‘The wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God’. Following on from this negative, we find two other features of true religion, namely, ‘concern for the helpless’, and ‘clean from worldliness’. These three points are not exhaustive of what religion is, but they are essential.

**1. Control the tongue**

The Pharisee, like many today, liked to think he was religious, or morally upright at least. Many people will tell you they are good people, as good as the next person anyway, and that they deserve a place in heaven. They don’t think it necessary to attend corporate worship, despite what is written in the Bible. And this ‘morally upright’ person readily excuses himself or herself when they utter profanities or blaspheme the name of God from time to time- ‘we all get angry and blow off steam at times’ they say. We ask, as the Lord asks, if this is the case, how then are you different from the person who does not believe in God. How are you different for the person who worships idols? What is the point of ‘being good’ only some of the time? Besides, who is judging your good deeds? You? Are you listening to the Lord? ‘Who are you to judge another’ (4:12). Remember, without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb 11:6).

Be ‘slow to speak’ says James. Words once spoken cannot be taken back. Yes, we can ask forgiveness, but the damage or hurt has been done. True religion means controlling the tongue or putting a bridle on the tongue. A bridle is what we put on the head of the horse before riding it. The essential part of the bridle is the ‘bit’ that goes in the mouth. Using the reins attached to this ‘bit’, the rider can steer and stop the horse. James expands on this metaphor in chapter 3. The apostle Paul speaks directly about self-control as one of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:23). He urges believers to, ‘speak the truth in love’ and, ‘speak to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs’ (Eph 4:15, 5:19). ‘Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers’ (Eph 4:29).

James declares one’s religion useless or in vain if one fails to bridle or control his or her tongue. All religious ritual, liturgy, or ceremony is to no avail before God the Father if your words outside the church are unacceptable to God. If you want to know what is acceptable to God read your Bible, and look at the life of Jesus. We hear people around us taking the Lord’s name in vain all the time but let us not join them. James points to people deceiving their own hearts even as they worship because they fail to bridle their tongue. When I hear someone takes God’s name in vain I stop listening, and I think God does the same.

**2. Concern for the helpless**

Words are one thing, actions another. Just as true religion can be defiled by angry or blasphemous words, so it can be defiled by evil or selfish deeds, or a failure to do good deeds; there are sins of commission and sins of omission. James’ teaching becomes positive as he turns the focus upon deeds that mark true religion, religion that is acceptable to God. Here in verse 27 he makes it clear that ‘pure and undefiled religion’ is, ‘before God and the Father’. Religion is all about pleasing God not man. Our life and worship must be acceptable to God. Again, do understand that God has revealed what is acceptable to him. It is not for us to be making our own judgments in this regard. Some Christian worship can be idolatrous according to James. Is this the case still today?

Jesus said, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’. This is a command, not an optional extra. Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan to illustrate this command. Jesus also helped the poor and needy himself; he healed, indeed raise from the dead, the son of a widow (Luke 7:11f). Jesus was doing the works of his Father. God is spoken of as being, ‘a father to the fatherless and a defender of widows’ (Ps 68:5).

When Israel turned away from God to worship other gods, the poor and needy were not only neglected, they were exploited, and God got angry (Isa 1:17). God cares about the poor and needy, and his covenant people should do the same. Moses gave laws about not mistreating widows and orphans (Exod 22:22), and about leaving some of the harvest for widows to glean.

Women did not work outside the home, so becoming a widow meant poverty in those days, and still today in many societies- remember Naomi and Ruth. In the early church, provision was made for the needs of widows (Acts 6). Deception with regard to giving to the apostle’s needy fund was judged severely (Acts 5). The apostle John said it was not possible to love God if we shut up our hearts to a brother in need when we have the means to help (1John 3:17). The apostle Paul not only taught giving help to those in need, he actually organised a church-wide collection for members of the Jerusalem church suffering famine. James was the one to receive this gift from Paul (Acts 21:18). Things in this church must have changed for James to be writing the way he does in this letter.

Concern for the poor and needy in general, and for widows and orphans in particular, continues to be a hallmark of Christian mission around the world. Orphanages and hospitals are still needed, along with feeding programs for widows and others. Someone has defined ministry as ‘responding to the authentic needs of others with the love of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit.

While ‘visiting widows and orphans in their trouble’ is a mark of true religion, it is not the means of salvation. James’ next point about remaining ‘unspotted from the world’ confirms this; even remaining ‘unspotted from the world’ does to save us, even if we could do so without God’s help! When Jesus spoke about feeding the hungry and taking in the stranger as being like doing this to Jesus, and therefore a mark of being in his kingdom, he was affirming what James says- or vice versa (Mat 25:31f). Concern for the hungry and the homeless is a mark, an essential mark, of our faith, but such deeds are not an alternative to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ: ‘For by grace are you saved through faith’.

**3. Clean from worldliness**

Under the old covenant, animals offered as sacrifice to the Lord had to be without spot or blemish. Nothing unclean was to be brought into the holy place of the temple. To do so would have defiled the holy place. Under the new covenant, Jesus offered himself as the sacrifice for our sin, the Lamb without blemish or without sin. For us to come into the presence of the holy God, we must be without blemish also; we must be holy. As believers we are washed clean in the blood of Christ (Rev 1:5). Our duty to God by way of thankfulness for his grace and mercy is to ‘present our bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service’ (Rom 12:1). Paul goes on in verse 2 of Romans 12 to say, ‘And do not be conformed to this world’. This world is a place of wickedness, sin and death because of the Fall. It is Satan’s territory. But in his death and resurrection, Christ defeated Satan and set us free from his dominion.

True religion involves sacrificing ourselves, body and soul, to the Lord, and resisting the pull of the world, the flesh, and the devil. True religion, according to James, includes ‘keeping oneself unspotted from the world’ (1:27). John makes it clear, as James does, that we cannot love God and also love the world or the things of the world (1John 2:15). As believers we are in the world, but not of the world. The Bible does not teach withdrawal from the world; how can we visit widows and orphans in their trouble if we lock ourselves away in a monastery? On the other hand, our lives must not be bound up in the things of the world. James later refers to fights and quarrels among the people, saying that these come from ‘your desires for pleasure’ (4:1). They were coveting the things of the world. What James says here in verse 27 is by way of introduction to chapters 4 and 5, just as the word about bridling the tongue is an introduction to chapter 3.

Just as true religion before God the Father does not allow isolation from the world in a monastery and it does not allow the doing of good deeds, as in caring for widows and orphans, to be in and of itself true religion. A gospel that speaks only of good works, or of social welfare and the like, is not the whole gospel and not true religion either. James makes our words and holiness of life, as well as caring for widows and orphans, a matter of true religion before God the Father. Are you living a balanced Christian life that is acceptable to God through Jesus Christ our Lord?

**Faith and favouritism**  Text: James 2:1-13

One of the features of our Australian culture is the way we treat everyone equally; we are egalitarian. It was said that our airlines were among the safest in the world because a co-pilot could correct the pilot; not something done in come cultures. I remember sitting in a restaurant in England and being told the man at the next table was an earl. In India we could not get our cleaning lady to sit on a chair, but when, to her great surprise, we went to her house in the village, we sat on the floor- she was a fellow believer. Class consciousness is a curse upon most societies. Sadly this is increasing in our society; I don’t remember radio shows talking about your ‘brush with fame’ in my youth. What happens when a politician or celebrity enters a church today? Again, a church in India kept the front row for the local politician, who made a grand entrance, after the service started! Do we need to reassess our behaviour, our partiality, in the light of what the Bible teaches?

Jesus, the Son of God, was known as the friend of tax-collectors and sinners. Early in his ministry, Jesus was willing to enter the house of a Roman to heal his servant; Jews did not go into Gentile houses (Acts 10:28). When a ‘sinful’ woman entered Simon the Pharisee’s house he was horrified, especially when Jesus allowed her to touch his feet (Luke 7:36f). The church or churches to which James was writing were discriminating against poor people, in the sense that they did not welcome them into their meeting like they did rich people. Still today, some churches in southern USA are all-white or all-black churches. Jesus invited everyone to follow him because there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, in Jesus Christ. We may have denominations, and churches with different languages, but is it right for churches to be mono-cultural, or only for middle class people?

This letter of James, as we know, focusses on the outworking of faith in the life of the believer. He wants to see faith in action, to see pure religion, which necessitates control of the tongue, as well as helping widows and orphans (1:26, 27). James has also reminded the rich of the brevity of life (1:9-11). In this chapter he speaks against any form of favouritism within the church. He will remind the church of the second commandment given by Jesus: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’. This commandment informs much of our Christian ethic or morality, not the least of which involves treating every human being with respect and dignity. Our subheadings are: ‘Loathe favouritism’, ‘Look at God’, ‘Look at reality’ and, ‘Look at the law’.

**1. Loathe favouritism**

James addresses ‘My brethren’, or fellow believers and members of the church. He speaks of their faith, of their ‘holding the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory’ (2:1). ‘Lord of glory’ in the OT would be God or Yahweh. Glory is something that belongs to heaven (John 17:5), so this term may be meant as a reminder of heaven, in contrast to this world. ‘Holding the faith of Jesus’ means belonging to Jesus, and seeking to follow his example in all things. Readers of this letter should look to the life of Jesus and see if he was in any way partial when it came to preaching the kingdom of God. In fact, Jesus said it was hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God, but not impossible (Luke 18:24, 27).

James gives an example of what he means by showing favouritism or partiality. Some think it is a hypothetical example, but verse 6 indicates otherwise. You may well have witnessed such partiality in a church, as I have, but not been involved I hope! The picture is clear: a man in ‘fine apparel’ and wearing ‘gold rings’ comes into your church, and a poor, filthy beggar also comes in. One is obviously rich and the other poor in a material sense. What happens? The man in fine clothes is invited to ‘sit in a good place’. We might say, to sit up the front or on the stage; but please don’t think more important people sit up the front in our church! The beggar in his filthy, smelly clothes is told to stand up the back or sit on a footstool at the side (2:3). He is not likely to be putting any money in the plate, so no point wasting time with him! We may be more subtle than this, but our judgments may be the same. Partiality can be subtle, something in our thoughts rather than actions, but thoughts gives rise to actions. We readily judge people on appearances, on outward things, instead of looking at the heart. We forget what the Lord said through Samuel: ‘The Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart’ (1Sam 16:7).

Favouritism is not only incompatible with faith in Jesus Christ, it is also venturing into His role as judge. In his second coming, Jesus will come as judge. Judgment belongs to God, not us. Jesus warned about judging others in his sermon on the mount; James does the same. His particular focus in this passage is on outward appearances, and with evil thoughts behind such judgment (2:4). The kingdoms of this world are focussed on riches and fame, but not the kingdom of God. Favouritism belongs to worldly kingdoms, not God’s kingdom. In worldly kingdoms man seeks his own glory, and he is his own judge. In the kingdom of God we seek the glory of God and recognise God alone as judge. We also recognise God’s special regard for the poor, our next point, and God’s law with regard to respect for fellow human beings, our last point.

**2. Look to God**

James keeps appealing to ‘my beloved brethren’ on this matter of favouritism in the fellowship. He urges them to look to God himself and his partiality, or lack thereof, as revealed in Scripture. In fact, God ‘has chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom’ (2:5). The apostle Paul says of the believers in Corinth that ‘not many were mighty or noble when called’ (1Cor 1:26). Maybe James wants the Jewish-background believers that are now ‘scattered abroad’ to remember that they were once ‘the poor of this world’ (1:1). We have suggested that they were refugees who fled Jerusalem and Judea because of famine and persecution. It seems that some had become rich in the meantime. It is not unusual in a society for some to get rich and others to fall into poverty. The question is, how does society respond?

A communist society takes from the rich and gives to the poor- or to the leaders! A capitalist society lets the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. In a Jewish or Christian society, the rich will share with the poor because this is the will of God (Deut 15:11, 1John 3:17). The Bible warns that the rich too easily forget the Lord (Prov 30:8, 9). James actually says that down through history God has chosen the poor of this world to be his servants. We see this supremely in the suffering servant, our Lord Jesus Christ. Those who are poor he makes rich, not in a material sense but ‘rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him’ (2:5). James is not saying the rich are excluded, any more than Jesus does (Luke 18:24-27); there is no liberation theology here. It is just that the rich must realise their spiritual poverty and repent and believe the gospel like every other member of God’s family.

**3. Look to reality**

A second reason for not showing favouritism towards the rich is actually a group of three rhetorical questions. The first asks them to look at who oppresses them (2:6). James will later explain how the rich get rich, namely by exploiting their workers (5:4). Did you see the TV program explaining how QANTAS maintains profits to pay its chief executive and shareholders? They sacked 1700 workers and still expect their operations run smoothly. In the time of Jesus, and still today, wealth was often tied up in property or real estate. Jesus spoke of a widow crying out for justice, probably because some rich person had encroached on her land (Luke 18). Moving boundary stones was not uncommon.

The second question is, ‘Who is dragging you into court?’ The widow in the parable went to court trying to get justice. The judge did not care about this woman until she ‘wearied’ him. In too many societies the rich have the judges in their pocket. In any case, who can afford to go to court but the rich? I have seen a poor person sent to prison for a crime committed by a rich man. Besides, the church may well find that the rich man coming to their meeting puts even less on the plate than the beggar!

A third rhetorical question regarding reality and the rich is about blasphemy or slander: ‘Do they [the rich] not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called?’ (2:7). All followers of Christ were known as Christians. Their detractors and oppressors mocked them using this name. We hear people calling us ‘religious’ in a mocking way, and also hear the name of Christ spoken carelessly or in cursing. Hearing such blasphemy disturbs us. James does not indicate just who is blaspheming the name of Christ, apart from them being rich. It is hard to imagine them being in the church, but not impossible. In the church at Corinth, Paul had to deal with deceitful workers exploiting believers and ridiculing the apostle himself.

**4. Look to the law**

James is not legalistic but some of his readers may have been. They may have been saying, ‘But there is no law against partiality’. It is spoken of by Moses but not in the Decalogue (Lev 19:15, Deut 16:19). James, however, points to a law which Jesus gave as a summary of the second table of the Decalogue. He calls it the ‘royal law according to the Scripture’ (2:8). It is royal or supreme precisely because Jesus affirmed it as the second of two commandments, and ‘like unto the first’; the apostle Paul also refers to this summarising love commandment: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’ (Lev. 19:18, Mat 22:39, Rom 13:9).

James assures us that this law about loving your neighbour applies to showing favouritism, as indeed it applies to many other ethical issues and matters of conduct. To break the law is sin, as our Shorter Catechism says in Q14, and this ‘royal law’ is no exception. It may not be as clear as laws about murder and adultery, but according to Jesus, this royal law covers such sins and more. It is obvious, is it not, that to murder someone is a gross neglect of love, just as to commit adultery is a betrayal of love. The law expresses God’s character and will.

James goes on to refer to these two laws, murder and adultery, not so much because they are summed up in the royal law but to point out that to break one commandment is tantamount to breaking the whole law. You do not have to break every law in the book to be declared guilty and get sent to prison- one will do! This is how any law code operates, the law of God included. Jesus said he did not come to destroy the law but to fulfil it, and here is a case of Jesus fulfilling the law and making it applicable to his church (Mat 5:17). The church to which James was writing once exercised love and care towards every member, and indeed welcomed all (Acts 2:45-47). Things had obviously changed. James’ final word on the matter of favouritism, that was entering the church, is about the law of liberty. The law of liberty contrasts with the law of judgment. The law of liberty is the law of love, the law expressing God’s love for his people, and the law God’s people must reflect if they are truly his people.

Remember the true or pure religion referred to at the end of chapter 1? Orphans and widows are too easily discriminated against by the world, and even in the church, just like poor people and beggars. The law of liberty and of love is the law of Christ (1Cor 9:21). There is no law against love and the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:23) because these are the essential outcomes of the Spirit, the essential outcomes of faith. Mercy, God’s mercy, triumphs over judgment, as we see in the cross. But for anyone rejecting God’s mercy or failing to understand what it mean, judgment remains. ‘He who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him’ (John 3:36). He who does believe the Son must give evidence of this in their life in the church and in the world (1:27). Jesus declared, ‘Blessed are the merciful for they will obtain mercy’ (Mat 5:7). **Faith and works** Text: James 2:14-26

The Reformation led by Martin Luther, and John Huss before him, centred on sinners being saved or justified by faith alone. The Church of Rome had gone down path of making works an essential part of salvation. Works, including the sacraments, pilgrimages, and ultimately indulgences, a ‘cash for conversion’ scheme. While indulgences have ceased, other works continue to be demanded as part of justification by this church, and indeed some Protestant churches. God opened Luther’s eyes through Romans 3 in particular: ‘By deeds of the law no flesh will be justified’ and, ‘We conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from deeds of the law’ (Rom 3:20, 28). In Ephesians 2:8 we read, ‘For by grace you have been saved through faith… not of works’. But do keep these verses in context; Ephesians 2:10 reads, ‘For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them’.

Luther, understandably, was not impressed by what is written in James 2; he called this an ‘epistle full of straw’. I say ‘understandably’ because of the times in which he lived. I was ‘privileged’ to visit cathedrals and monasteries from Luther’s world, spiritually oppressive places for a true believer. Maybe Luther’s opinion of James changed as he read the text more closely, and in context. We must look at the context of this passage, as well as that of Ephesians 2. We might also note that Paul was being hounded by Judaizers, men who said every Christian had to keep the laws of Moses in order to be saved. The gospel he said, was a gospel of salvation by grace through faith and not of works of the law. James was writing to a different audience it seems- although they were Jewish-background believers. He urges his readers to be doers of the word and not hearers only (1:22); some had become rich and worldly, and what we call nominal Christians. They were neglecting the needy, even exploiting them, and showing partiality within the fellowship. This is the context in which James writes about faith and works, declaring, ‘Faith without works is dead’ (2:17, 20, 26).

Our three subheadings are: ‘Faith must be seen’, ‘Faith and works inseparable’, and ‘Faith without works is dead’.

**1. Faith must be seen**

The focus of this letter is on pure religion, on being doers not just hearers of the word, the Bible. James does not ignore faith or deny its centrality to salvation. He begins this chapter referring to the ‘faith of our Lord Jesus Christ’. However, the church or churches he was writing to were misunderstanding faith and its relationship to works in the believer’s life. He begins the second half of chapter 2 referring to ‘someone’ who says he has faith but not works (2:14). ‘My brethren’ he asks, ‘Can such faith save him?’ (2:14 NIV).

We have mentioned the Roman Catholic Church and its theology of salvation by faith plus works. Such theology is widespread even in Protestant churches. As a Reformed church, we hold to the doctrines of grace that were re-discovered in the Reformation and handed down to us in our Confession of Faith. But there are so called hyper-grace Christians. There is hyper-Calvinism, summed up in the man who told William Carey to sit down because, ‘When God plans to convert the heathen he will do it without consulting you or me’. Hyper-grace is different, although not new; it is not unlike the Sandemanian error in which faith was limited to mere ‘intellectual assent’ (contrast 1Peter 1:8). Today we have Paul Ellis promoting this error, which repudiates works and even sanctification, making salvation not only of grace but purely intellectual. Paul had people saying to him, ‘shall we continue to sin that grace may abound?’ (Rom 6:1). ‘Certainly not’ said Paul, but some would answer ‘yes’! Slightly different, but along the same lines, is Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s ‘cheap grace’ criticism of Christians who went along with Hitler.

For too many Christians, faith is purely intellectual. Whether they have faith is questionable, but the point is they say they have faith yet their lives show little or no evidence of Christ-like living. James questions the benefit or point of such faith, of faith without works; he even questions their actual salvation (2:14).

James likes using illustrations to prove his point (2:2-3, 15-15). If you see a brother or sister in need and say, ‘Go in peace, get some food and clothes to keep you warm’ but do not physically give them what they need, what use is that? (2:15, 16). What can we say? A word of blessing does not put food on the table, or clothes on the back. Have you faced such situations? We see people in need all the time- at least on TV. What do we do? Firstly, James is talking about brothers and sisters, people in the church. I checked my new ‘brothers and sisters’ NIV Bible and found they translate ‘brethren’ in verse 14, and throughout this letter, as ‘brothers and sisters’, and now translate the actual Greek ‘brothers and sisters’ in the same way- very confusing! This dynamic translation has become too dynamic!

Secondly, this brother or sister is in your presence, meaning you are called to help them, or get them help- assuming they are genuine. We as a church have a needy fund and you, I am sure, have resources to physically help people who you know are in genuine need. I hope your faith in Jesus Christ is demonstrated in not just praying but physically helping a brother or sister in need. In our society we have welfare agencies, but still people need help in accessing these. In NT times such agencies did not exist- it was the church that helped the poor and needy.

This was not necessarily an actual case; James is simply illustrating his point. His point is that just as words alone do not actually help a needy person, so faith or belief by itself is of no use- it is dead. God gives us faith that we may live by faith: ‘the just shall live by faith’ (Hab 2:4, Rom 1:17). James refers to Abraham as a man who lived by faith. This ‘living by faith’ James calls ‘having works’, the works of faith. His illustration is irrefutable, as is the conclusion he draws. James is not contradicting anything written by the apostle Paul. His question, ‘Can such faith save him?’ points to an intellectual or ‘word only’ faith, which, if not genuine and living, is dead.

**2. Faith and works inseparable**

James again has ‘someone’, not a known person, saying something to him (2:18). Answering anticipated questions is a method of teaching. This ‘someone’ has a theology that separates faith and works: ‘You have faith, and I have works’. I came across this theology on the mission field. Christians would go to help a poor community with food or water or clothes or medicine, but did not speak about Jesus in case they offended someone. They said it was the duty of other Christians to bring the gospel. I found the opposite also, namely Christians who preached the gospel but did nothing to feed the hungry or heal the sick, contrary to what Jesus did (Mat 9:25). Our theology or belief must be seen in our lives.

James challenges this ‘someone’ to show him their faith without works (2:18). We can listen to what they say of course, but people’s words do not always come from the heart. James counters this separation saying, ‘I will show you my faith by my works’ (2:18). Words are cheap, works are costly. Remember what Bonhoeffer said about ‘cheap grace’. Words are important of course; Paul writes, ‘If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved’ (Rom 10:9). But note the need for faith in your heart. James is saying that works, good deeds done in obedience to God’s word and in the power of the Holy Spirit, are an outworking of faith. ‘Without faith it impossible to please God’ (Heb 11:6), so works done without faith do not count as far as God is concerned. So again, faith and works cannot be separated. No faith means no works that please God, and no works means faith that is questionable to say the least- actually faith that is dead according to James.

James reduces mere belief that there is one God to being in bed with the devil (2:19 cf. Jewish *Shema*). You will have met people who assure you they believe in ‘God’ or a ‘supreme being’. They know nothing about this ‘God’, and don’t want to know. We call them agnostics, but they may call themselves Christians! When asked if she was a believer, a woman once answered me, ‘Of course, my whole family are Christians’. I recently heard that she is now a believer, a person who repented of her sin and personally believes in Jesus Christ. James reminds us that the devil believes that God exists, and that he is the holy and all-powerful to judge, so he trembles before God.

**3. Faith without works is dead**

Faith by itself, or faith without works, is dead, says James in verse 17. He said this by way of answering a couple of ‘someone asks’ questions. He is practising ‘apologetics’, but in no way apologising for his conclusion. He declares again at the beginning and the end of the remaining verses that, ‘Faith without works is dead’ (2:20, 26) although in verse 20 it is, faith without works is ‘not working’ or ‘useless’. His initial illustration of the futility of blessing a needy person with words, but not materially helping them, was powerful.

John makes the same point about having ‘this world’s goods’ but not helping a brother in need (1John 3:17). John asks, ‘How can the love of God abide in such a person?’ James asks how such a person can claim to have a living faith in Jesus. He is critical of this ‘someone’ wanting to separate faith and works, calling them ‘foolish’ or literally ‘empty-headed’ (2:20).

James now turns to Scripture itself for examples of faith that is alive, not dead, faith that works because it produces works. Paul refers to Genesis 15:6 to show that Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteous, before he was circumcised (Gal 3:6). Circumcision, the Sabbath, and food laws, were works of the law for Jews. But Abraham was justified before he was circumcised. James agrees with all this, and indeed refers to the very same verse about Abraham (2:23).

But James looks at something else about Abraham, namely his obedience to God’s command to offer up his only son, Isaac. James refers to this ‘work’ of Abraham as ‘fulfilling’ the Scripture about Abraham believing and being justified by God. He speaks of this obedience of Abraham as the outworking of his faith, saying, ‘By works faith was made perfect or complete’ (2:22). So intimately connected was this work with the faith of Abraham that James can say, ‘was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar’ (2:21). Abraham, our father in the faith, believed and was justified with no mention of works of the law (cf. Gal 2:16). But the faith he was given, and by which he was justified, made him obedient to God’s word. It made him ‘the friend of God’ because he was made right with God (2:23, 2Chron 20:7).

James has a second example from Scripture of a person ‘justified by works’, namely Rahab the prostitute (2:25). She was a Canaanite living in Jericho. When Joshua entered Canaan she risked her life to help his spies, and was rewarded with her life, indeed with spiritual life as a child of God; she is in the ancestry of Jesus (Mat 1:5). James does not mention her faith, but Scripture does tell us that Rahab believed the God of the Jews to be, ‘God in heaven above and earth beneath’ who had ‘given the land to his people’ (Josh 2:11). Her knowledge of God was limited and her faith child-like, but it was a living faith demonstrated in her work of helping God’s people. So again, James can speak of Rahab being justified by works (2:25).

In verse 24 James draws a preliminary conclusion- ‘You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only’. With such words he seems to be contradicting Paul, but we now understand his ‘justified by works’ means works that are the outworking of faith, faith that is alive, not dead. In fact, he refers to faith at the end of this verse, ‘and not by faith only’. The ‘only’ makes all the difference, especially as we believe justification is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

James assumes the ‘faith only’ teaching of Paul’s gospel but wants us to understand that this faith is not alone; it is a life of obedience to Christ’s commands, especially the royal law of verse 8. Paul would agree. He speaks of being saved unto good works, and of ‘working out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you’ (Eph 2:10, Phil 2:13).

Faith without works is dead, as dead as a body without the spirit or breath of life (2:26). Let us not be corpse-like Christians, men or women who look like Christians, and even talk like Christians, but whose actions or works give no evidence of being Christians. Let us show that we are a new creation in Christ Jesus, created to do ‘good works which God has prepared beforehand that we should walk in them’ (Eph 2:10).

**Little tongue, big trouble** Text: James 3:1-12

James is often seen as the NT book of wisdom; the closing verses of this chapter are about the source of wisdom. It is the NT, ‘Book of Proverbs’. Many of the Proverbs are about the tongue and about words: ‘A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger’ (Prov 15:1) is one you will know. James has already referred to the tongue in his reference to true religion. He teaches us to be, ‘Swift to hear and slow to speak’ and to ‘bridle our tongue’ (1:19, 26). He expands on this subject here in chapter 3 because it is so important.

The tongue is a little part of our bodies but it brings us, and others, a lot of trouble, a lot of hurt and sorrow. James goes so far as to call our tongue ‘an unruly evil, full of deadly poison’ (3:8). He spends most of this chapter describing the dangers of the tongue, and indeed, the ‘stricter judgment’ teachers will face, without offering much hope. His closing words about ‘wisdom from above’ offer hope, of course. Our hope is in the Lord who gives us his Spirit, who in turn gives the gift or ability of self-control- in addition to love, peace, patience and kindness (Gal 5:22). But sin must be identified then confessed. If you have difficulty identifying the sins of your tongue, just ask a close friend to help you! Our subheadings are: ‘Teachers and the tongue’, ‘The tongue is like…’, ‘Taming the tongue’ and, ‘Two-tongued speaking’.

**1. Teachers and the tongue**

‘My brethren’ signals a change in subject here in chapter 3, just as in chapter 2. James addresses men and women in the church with a focus on men wanting to become teachers. In the past, and still today to some extent, church members often want to become leaders or teachers or missionaries. The apostles had to deal with false teachers entering churches they had established (2Cor 11:13, 2Peter 2:1). These men were often smooth talkers, misleading the people with ‘another gospel’. John Huss, as we learned, entered the priesthood because of poverty. Thankfully he became a faithful preacher, but many of his contemporaries were false teachers. Huss reminds us that being a teacher, a faithful teacher, will be costly; it is not a calling that promises riches!

James discourages men from becoming teachers in the church. He does not mention gifts and a calling, but Paul does: ‘The Lord gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers (Eph 4:11). Teaching is a gift (Rom 12:7), as well as an office or calling in the church. At the same time as urging men to ‘desire the office of elder’, Paul lists many qualifications (1Tim 3:1-7). The call to teach is a high calling, a privilege with a great responsibility. ‘To him whom much is given, much from him will be required’ (Luke 12:48).

James refers to teaching because teaching involves words. Teachers can influence listeners positively or negatively, for good or for evil. So James has a warning for teachers in the church: ‘We shall receive a stricter judgment’; notice he includes himself, as I must. I do prayerfully seek to be faithful to God and his word in my preaching, and faithful in shepherding the flock of God. The ‘stricter judgment’ is divine judgment; we all have to give an account to God (Rom 14:12, 2Cor 5:10). Jesus says that scribes and Pharisees who ‘for a pretence make long prayers’ will receive greater condemnation (Mark 12:40).

James acknowledges that ‘we all stumble in many things’ (cf. Prov 18:6, 7), yet must, in God’s strength, endeavour not to stumble. We aim to be perfect (Mat 5:48) despite the difficulties, especially difficulties relating to our tongue. The tongue, he asserts, is the cause of much stumbling and sin, so to bridle our tongue is the beginning of controlling our whole body (3:2).

**2. The tongue is like…**

Our tongue is only a small muscle stuck in our mouth, yet to a great extent it defines our life. If we followed the advice of Jesus about cutting off what causes us to sin, we would all be without a tongue! In India some beggars had no tongue so could not talk; we were told their owner did this evil to them. The tongue has influence out of all proportion to its size, an influence that begins from a young age. Parents spend as much time teaching their children to ‘speak the truth in love’ as they do teaching them to play football- I hope!

A bridle is what we put on the head of the horse for riding. The essential part of this is the bit that goes into the mouth. The two reins attached to the ends of this bit allow the rider to turn the horse, and stop it. James likens our tongue to this small bit; but does not include the reins in his analogy! His concern is unbridled or uncontrolled speech.

In a second ‘tongue analogy’, James tells us to look at the ship, at the rudder of the ship in particular. The rudder is small but with it the pilot can control the huge ship, even during a fierce storm. If the rudder breaks he has no control over the ship. James likens our tongue to the rudder of the ship, a small muscle that determines the direction we take in life. His focus is on boastful words that take us in the wrong direction in life (3:5).

In a third ‘tongue analogy’, James refers to a little fire, a spark or a match that sets a whole forest on fire (3:5, 6). This a vivid picture for us when it is bushfire season. A cigarette thrown from a car window can start a bushfire. My father used to carry a box of matches even after he stopped smoking. He would burn clumps of rubbish around the paddocks; only once did he start a bushfire!

This analogy goes beyond the smallness of the match, and the big fire it can start. The fire started by this match can destroy everything in its path. ‘Even so the tongue’, though small, is ‘a world of iniquity’ or evil, that can defile or corrupt our whole person (3:6). The words people use give us a clue as to where they come from in terms of home and region. A child who uses a swear word in every sentence is not likely to impress us. It does not have to be swear words of course; some Christians have ‘very sharp tongues’ as we say. Perhaps you have met someone with a sweet face, only to be horrified when the tongue is let loose.

The words we say in many ways define who we are. Boastful words or unkind words will limit the number and type of friends you have, and even the places you can go. James says your whole ‘course of nature’ or existence is set on fire by your tongue, and it is set on fire by hell or Gehenna (3:6). Jesus reminds us that it is what comes out of the heart that defiles a person, and goes on to say that lies and blasphemies and the like come from a corrupt heart (Mat 15:11, 18). James says a lot of negative things about the tongue, as does Jesus, but Jesus points to the heart. When we believe we take control away from Satan or hell and give it the Holy Spirit.

**3. Taming the tongue**

James continues his warning directed at teachers, and indeed all members of the church: ‘We all stumble … in word’ (3:2). He started comparing the tongue to inanimate things, and now moves on to animals. He looks at the whole realm of creatures, as detailed in Genesis 1, saying that all have been tamed by mankind, ‘but no man can tame the tongue’ (3:7, 8). It is like listening to news about man’s great scientific and technological achievements, and at the end hearing boastful or abusive language. Remember the politician who gave a wonderful speech but when off-stage, with his microphone still on, we heard him swearing about someone. Man controls the animals and the birds, and thinks he controls the climate, but we are not able to our own tongue. When James says, ‘No man can’ in verse 8, Augustine and others say the other side of the coin is that ‘God can’ by his grace.

That said, James continues exposing the evils of the human tongue, calling it an ‘unruly evil, full of deadly poison’ (3:8). In Proverbs we read that a lying tongue and flattering mouth works ruin (Prov 26:28), but it is the psalmist who speaks of the tongue ‘like a serpent with poison under its lips (Ps 140:3). The apostle Paul refers to this verse when concluding that ‘all are under sin’ (Rom 3:13). We still refer to people having ‘a poisonous tongue’ and ‘biting words’. We hate to think of such people in the church, but it is the church James is addressing: ‘My brethren’.

**4. Two-tongued speech**

From speaking with a forked tongue, James turns to double-tongued speech. I have just referred to the politician speaking on stage and then off stage. We refer to men speaking out one side of their mouth, knowing that something different will come for the other side. It is not unusual to hear men and women praising God inside the church, then coming out to curse a person made in the image of God- sometimes the preacher! James again speaks in the plural saying, ‘We bless our Lord and Father’ with our tongue, then turn around and curse a person made in the likeness of God (3:9). Such hypocrisy, such perversity, coming from the little muscle in our mouths, a muscle we cannot control! ‘My brethren, these things ought not to be so’ writes James in his measured condemnation of such perversity (3:10).

To describe double-tongued speaking and its perversity, James puts forward three illustrations; the first two are rhetorical questions. Firstly, does a spring or well give both fresh and bitter water? (3:11). I heard of a fellow getting giardia from drinking water in the national park. We had a lot of this in the mountains of India. Spring water is pure but it gets polluted as it runs through villages. On the plains, wells can get polluted with *E.coli,* making people sick, with some dying as if with deadly poison. People in Israel drank from springs or wells all the time, but none of these were sweet one moment and bitter the next. Such a thing would be completely unnatural, yet blessing and cursing can come from the same human mouth.

The second illustration is from an orchard. James appeals to ‘My brethren’ with an illustration similar to one used by Jesus. Jesus often spoke of a tree being known by its fruit (Mat 7:20, 12:33). He did so in the context of false teachers and their words. ‘Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles’ (Mat 7:16)? James is a bit less descriptive in saying, ‘Can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs’ (3:12). The answer to both rhetorical questions is an emphatic, ‘No’! Jesus was referring to a man’s corrupt or bad heart producing only bad fruit. James, on the other hand, is referring to duplicity, to a tree not producing fruit according to its kind. According to the teaching of Jesus, a good heart cannot produce bad fruit (Mat 7:18), so if bad fruit is found, or if cursing comes from your mouth, your heart cannot be good.

James returns to his salt and fresh water spring as he concludes his teaching about the tongue, the unbridled tongue that we are all born with and struggle to control, even with the help of the Holy Spirit. His conclusion is unequivocal: ‘No spring yields both salt water and fresh’ (3:12). Our words are an essential part of who we are (3:6). Our words can be like swords or like healing balm. Jesus warns us that every word we speak is heard by God, so let us listen to Jesus and to James, and let our ‘yes’ be ‘yes’, and our ‘no’, ‘no’, ‘lest you fall into judgment’ (5:12, Mat 5:37).

**Wisdom from above brings peace** Text: James 3:13-18

The Lord appeared to Solomon when he began ruling over Israel, asking him what he wanted the Lord to give him (1Kings 3:5). Most kings want riches and honour, and death to their enemies, but Solomon was different. Solomon asked the Lord to give him wisdom to rule and judge the people of God. The Lord was pleased to hear this request and gave Solomon wisdom beyond that of any other man or woman. This wisdom was demonstrated in the case of the two prostitutes arguing over a baby. Some of Solomon’s wisdom is recorded in the Book of Proverbs.

Maybe James was reflecting on this Scripture when he wrote, ‘If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God’ (1:5). We are not born with wisdom, nor do we learn true wisdom. True wisdom, the ability to make right and just decisions all the time, is given by God to those who ask him. ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’ (Ps 111:10). You will be told that wisdom comes with knowledge and with advancing age, but a brief examination of our own lives, and the lives of men and women around us, shows that this is not true. Older people still do foolish things, and ‘professors’ or ‘experts’ still make mistakes- their personal lives are no different to the lives of less educated people.

Wisdom is given by God because God is the source of wisdom. The apostle Paul writes of Jesus Christ as, ‘the wisdom of God’ (1Cor 1:24, 30). True wisdom comes from God, and is first and foremost about our relating to God. Only when we are in a right relationship with God can we be in a right relationship with fellow human beings- and all creation for that matter. If we don’t believe God made the universe and everything in it we cut ourselves off from the wisdom of God our creator. And it is the same with our understanding of who we are; we are made in the image of God, so if we refuse to listen to our Maker we cut ourselves off from wisdom that is from above.

James began this letter referring to trials and the testing of our faith. He urged patience and God-given wisdom that we might endure such testing, and mature through it. He goes on to condemn partiality, and faith without works. Here at the end of chapter 3 and his sharing of ‘wisdom’ about the tongue, James defines true wisdom by contrasting earthly wisdom with heavenly wisdom. His teaching about the tongue was more negative than positive, a diagnosis of the problem without offering a remedy. Here at the end of the chapter he offers hope in the form of wisdom from above. Such wisdom is without partiality, peaceable, and full of mercy. Such wisdom is needed if we are to control our tongue.

James actually ends his teaching about the tongue by asking, ‘Who is wise and understanding among you?’ (3:13). The implied answer is, ‘no one’. With this question he introduces the characteristics of wisdom and understanding, the very things Solomon asked for. With a continuing emphasis on being ‘doers of the word, and not hearers only’ (1:22), James urges us to demonstrate the 'meekness of wisdom’ (3:13). He goes on to contrast two types of wisdom: ‘Wisdom of the world’ and ‘Wisdom from above’, or ‘Wisdom from Satan’ and ‘Wisdom from God.’

**1. Wisdom of the world**

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Study of the natural world should have pointed them to the God of creation, whose power and majesty is revealed in the creation. But, like many today, they chose to be blind. Professing to be wise they became fools (Rom 1:22). They worshipped created things rather than the creator, as Paul observed when he was in Athens (Acts 17:16). The people of Athens ‘spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or hear some new thing’ (Acts 17:21). Aristides said of Corinth that on every street corner one met a so-called wise man who had his own solutions to the world’s problems.

As humans we have the unique ability to communicate, and therefore pass on wisdom. We might think that the accumulation of wisdom would help the human race advance. But we face the stumbling block called ‘sin’. Each generation wants to live by its own wisdom; we do not wanted passed-down wisdom any more than we want passed-down clothes. We face the same stumbling block when it comes to wisdom from above, namely, proud hearts which listen to no one but self- which, as we learn from Jesus, is actually the voice of the devil.

James first mentions conduct that arises from worldly wisdom (3:14). We will look at this shortly. He then mentions the source of this wisdom in verse 15. It is not from above ‘but is earthly, sensual, and demonic’. It is wisdom that comes from the world, the flesh, and the devil. In Scripture, the term ‘world’ usually refers to the fallen world, to God’s creation after sin entered it. Here the term ‘earthly’ leaves us in no doubt as to the realm from which this wisdom comes. It does not come from heaven or from God. When the Bible was taught in schools and churches, children learnt what God says about how we should live. Nowadays they are told to learn from the animals or birds how they should live. Wisdom derived from nature is earthly wisdom.

The second source of ‘this wisdom’ is from our senses, or from our flesh. This is wisdom that says, ‘If it feels good do it’. This is wisdom perpetrated by Freud and much modern psychology. They say we are just animals driven by desires, desires for food and procreation. Satisfying the desires of the flesh is the basis of this worldly wisdom. There is nothing spiritual about this wisdom. Lusts of the flesh and of the eyes is at the centre of worldly wisdom.

The third source of this wisdom is the devil (3:15). We are all born in sin as children of the devil. John makes it clear that people who reject Jesus cannot call God their Father. They are in fact, children of the devil (John 8:44). He refers to Satan as ‘the ruler of this world’ (John 14:30). James counsels us to ‘resist the devil and he will flee from you’ (4:7). If you don’t resist the devil he will remain with you, tempting you into foolish and destructive ways.

What are these foolish and destructive ways? James first speaks of envy, bitter envy. The word for ‘envy’ is literally ‘zeal’, which can be good, but the word ‘bitter’ makes it something bad. We have been observing the jealousy of King Saul towards David. Jealousy led to hatred and the desire to kill David. Bitter envy is widespread among people whose vision in life is limited to this world. They have to ‘make their mark’ in this world because this world is all there is for them.

Envy or jealousy is linked to self-seeking, which in turn is linked to boasting and lies (3:14). Worldly wisdom is relative not absolute. It is personal wisdom, as already mentioned, and as such is clouded, even blinded, by the lusts of the flesh and the pride of life. This wisdom says, ‘I am most important’ and ‘I must win whatever it takes’. Tragically, what it takes is often boasting and lies, using and abusing others. Truth is dispensable when it comes to worldly wisdom.

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**Spiritual adultery** Text: James 4:1-10

The seventh commandment is, ‘You shall not commit adultery’. We all know what adultery is even if it is given many euphemisms and not taken seriously in our society. What we might not know about is spiritual adultery, which is what James is condemning in this letter to Christians. The OT prophets often referred to the people of Israel as ‘adulterous’. Jeremiah speaks of the Lord being ‘a husband to them; to the people he saved out of Egypt and with whom he made the Mosaic covenant (Jer 31:32).

This covenant declared, ‘I will be your God and you shall be my people’. It is not unlike the marriage covenant. So when God’s people turned away from him to worship others gods, they were called adulteresses: ‘As a wife treacherously departs from her husband, so you have treacherously departed from me’ (Jer 3:20, Ezek 23:45). Hosea the prophet was actually told to marry a woman who would be unfaithful to him in a ‘living message’ to the spiritually adulterous people of God. Jesus also refers to Jewish leaders as ‘a wicked and adulteress generation’ (Mat 12:39).

So while it comes as a shock to hear James calling Christians ‘adulteresses’, he is following in the teaching of the prophets and of Jesus with regard to men and women who turn away from desiring the Lord to desiring or lusting after the things of the world: James has ‘adulteresses’ because the church is the bride of Christ (Eph 5:23-32). The language is shocking because the sin is serious; God is a jealous husband. He will not put up with Christians wanting ‘an affair’ with the world. James has just pointed out that worldly wisdom is demonic, the opposite of wisdom from above or from Christ. So worldly living, living to satisfy the lusts of the flesh and the lusts of the eyes and the pride of life (1John 2:16), is not compatible with being the bride of Christ, and not acceptable to God. It amounts to spiritual adultery.

Our subheadings are: ‘Bring desires to God, seeking his will’, ‘Beware spiritual adultery’, ‘But God gives grace to the humble’ and, ‘Be humble and submit to God’.

**1. Bring desires to God, seeking his will**

One of the fruits of heavenly wisdom is peace (3:18). But peace was not seen among the people to whom James was writing. Their lives and their churches were characterised by wars and fights (4:1). James asks where such conduct comes from. The words used are the same as those used for physical war and armed conflict, but just as we speak of a ‘war of words’, so James is probably referring to non-physical battles between church members. But James goes on to mention ‘murder’; again we can say, with Jesus, that to hate someone is tantamount to murder (Mat 5:22). Yet the Jews, who had the Ten Commandments, were willing to murder in the name of religion. And what about the inquisition set up by the church of Rome just before the Reformation? Sure, we would not call such murderers Christians, but they thought they were!

We do not know the nature of the fights James saw among these Christians, among ‘my brethren’ as he has been calling them up to this point, but we do know that to murder and to covet is sinful (4:2). James’ concern is the origin of such sinful behaviour. He gets to the root of the problem, just as Jesus did in Matthew 15:19. It is interesting that Paul, who had himself been a violent Jew, writes in Romans 7 of the commandment about coveting being a particular challenge.

The strife within the church comes from ‘your desires for pleasure that war in your members’ (4:1). ‘Your members’ refers to ‘your body’, not church members as such. It refers to what Paul wrote about in Romans 7, as just mentioned. It refers to sin in the heart, to our carnal nature fighting against the law, which is spiritual. ‘I see another law in my members warring against the law of my mind’ (Rom 7:23). Our carnal nature, or our flesh, has it desires, sinful desires. John calls them lusts, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life (1John 2:16). James also calls them lusts; ‘You lust and do not have’ (4:2). We might translate, ‘want something’, ‘desire’ or even ‘passion’, but here it is associated with murder or coveting so lust is a better translation.

What these Christians were lusting after we are not told, but carnal lusting is often related to riches or power or both - ‘your neighbour’s wife, house, field, ox, or donkey’ according to the tenth commandment. These Christians had apparently forgotten that every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights’ (1:17, cf. Phil 4:19). What they were lusting after they did not have because they did not ask God - with some qualifications! But note that like wisdom, every good thing, everything we should be desiring as children of God, comes from above or from God. So if we want these good things let us ask God and not resort to earthly wisdom and earthly ways of getting things.

We just referred to qualifications, and these are important. Too often Christians think God should give whatever they ask- they miss the point of the parable of the prodigal son! Some actually say God should give them the biggest house and most expensive car just to show how great and loving he is! James tells these Christians that even when they asked, as some apparently did, they did not get what they wanted because they asked ‘amiss’, or with wrong motives (4:3). Their prayers demonstrated a selfish concern for material things and worldly pleasures. They thought God was Santa Claus! But as our Father, God always wants what is best for us; he does not give what he knows will harm us and our relationship to him. God has a will for our lives and we should ask according to his will (Mat 6:10, 1John 5:14, Rom 12:2).

**2. Beware spiritual adultery**

Murder, coveting, and now adultery- and still there are those who say the Ten Commandments have no place in the NT! Adultery may have been removed from the marriage laws of our land, but it continues as a sin under God’s law, and a serious sin when it comes to the covenant Jesus, the Son of God, made with us in his own blood. As already mentioned, the OT prophets accused Israel of adultery when they turned away from the Lord to worship idols. Jesus also referred to ‘this adulterous generation’. We might link this to what he says about God and mammon (Mat 6:24). John says that you cannot love God at the same time as loving the world or the things of the world (1John 2:15).

This is the choice we all have to make - to love God or love the world in which we live. I remember more than one young graduate saying his aim in life was to get rich. But James, like John, is writing to ‘brethren’, to men and women of faith. So this accusation of adultery refers to just that, to men and women who have been unfaithful to God and need to repent and seek his forgiveness (1John 1:9). Clearly, the lustful living referred to by James was adulterous behaviour, conduct that is ‘earthly, sensual and demonic’ (3:15).

Christians who want to be ‘friends of the world’ automatically make themselves ‘enemies of God’ (4:4). While people delude themselves about a ‘happy divorce’, let there be no delusions about adultery or divorce when it comes to your relationship with God (Jer 3:8). We do not want to become enemies of God, do we!

Verse 5 is not easy to understand, and the Scripture James refers to is not an actual quotation; it is truth derived from Scripture, meaning the OT. Scholars argue about the Spirit dwelling in us- is it our human spirit or the Holy Spirit? We know that all who believe are given the Holy Spirit when they believe (Rom 8:9). So God lives in us by his Spirit (John 14:23), and he is jealous for our love, just as a husband is jealous for his wife. Our relationship with God is even closer than our relationship with our spouse because God is dwelling in us by his Spirit. How can we even think of doing something unfaithful towards God!

**3. ‘But God gives grace to the humble’**

What is the answer to spiritual adultery? James points to grace. He seems to conclude with Paul, ‘O wretched man that I am’ (Rom 7:24). Humanly speaking there is no hope, but God gives more grace (4.6). James quotes Proverbs 3:34: ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble’. Our hope is in the abundant grace of God, grace that is given when we humble ourselves before God. We cannot buy our way back into God’s favour with a bunch of flowers or a box of chocolates! We must get down on our knees and plead forgiveness. James goes on to speak of weeping, a sign of true repentance. Peter refers to this same proverb when speaking of humility before God and submission to one another in Christ (1Peter 5:5).

**4. Be humble and submit to God**

In the closing verses of our passage, James lists ten commands relating to humbling ourselves before God. My Bible has the heading ‘Humility cures worldliness’ but it is the grace of God given to us when we humble ourselves before God that cures worldliness. James begins these four verses with ‘Therefore’ (4:7). All these commands relate to humility and all are important, though we list them only briefly.

‘Submit to God’, God our Maker, our Lord, our King, and our husband. We must submit to the King who has the power to judge. God is our husband so we must submit to him as a wife to her husband (Eph 5:22).

‘Resist the devil, and he will flee from you’. Note these are active outcomes of humility and gifts of grace. A marriage filled with love and loyalty leaves no room for a third person. It is the same with our ‘marriage’ to the Lord. We neglect the means of grace to our peril!

‘Draw near to God and he will draw near to you’. God loves us and wants us to love him. Love cannot be commanded but, ‘If God so loves us we ought also to love one another’, and love him first and foremost (1John 4:10-11). James does not refer to love but clearly, drawing near to God involves love.

‘Cleanse your hands you sinner’. Yes, Christians are still sinners. We all sin against God in thought, word, and deed, in sins of commission and sins of omission (4:17). Just as the priests had to wash and cleanse themselves before worship in the tabernacle, so we have to symbolically cleanse ourselves from sin in the blood of Jesus Christ. We must acknowledge our sins and confess them before the Lord (1John 9).

‘Purify your hearts, you double-minded’. Sinful thoughts come from sinful hearts and minds. As believers, we have been given a new heart, a heart in which God lives by his Spirit. And we must listen to God’s Spirit and God’s word and not let impure, worldly thoughts control how we live. David prayed, ‘Create in me a clean heart, O God’, after he asked the Lord to, ‘Wash me and I shall be whiter than the snow’ (Ps 51:7, 10). God hates double-minded people and doubters, so let us be single-minded or wholehearted in our relationship with God, and Jesus Christ our Lord.

‘Lament, mourn and weep’- these three commands point to the seriousness of sin. Jesus wept over Jerusalem because of the judgment coming upon the adulterous people of that city (Luke 19:41). Judgment is coming to this world, and we should be weeping for those upon whom the wrath of God remains because they have rejected Jesus (John 3:36). We weep over our own sin, and the sin of others. We rejoice, of course, when we receive the grace of God in forgiveness.

‘Let your laughter be turned to mourning’- the world may laugh at sin but a child of God cannot. Moses chose affliction with the people of God rather than the passing pleasures of sin and the riches of Egypt. Our joy comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth, from honouring him, loving him, and serving him.

The tenth command returns to the theme of humility that James has been pursuing in these commands. He ends on a positive note, telling us that if and when we humble ourselves before the Lord, He will lift us up (4:10). Referring to the tax-collector who, confessing his sin, cried to God for mercy, Jesus said, ‘He who humbles himself will be exalted’ (Luke 18:14). Jesus humbled himself in becoming a man, and being obedient to God he was exalted to the right hand of God in heaven (Phil 2:8-9).

**If the Lord wills** Text: James 4:11-17

In March 2020 the borders of our nation were closed; flights in and out of the country stopped overnight. Thousands of people were prevented from fulfilling plans they had made for an overseas trip- including me! After this, state borders closed and thousands more had to abandon planned travel. Suddenly, we all lost control of our travel; we could not even leave the suburb. Many found this loss of control frustrating, and some despaired, as cries went up for more counselling services.

But was all this not a reminder that we are not in control of our lives. Was it not a reminder of Proverbs 27:1, ‘Do not boast about tomorrow for you do not know what a day may bring forth’, and of what James writes here in verse 14, ‘You do not know what will happen tomorrow’? He says this while warning Christian business men and women not to speak of plans made without seeking the Lord’s will. This will be our second lesson today. Our first is about speaking evil of a brother or sister.

**1. Stop speaking evil of one another**

The main focus of this letter is, ‘Be doers of the word, not hearers only’ or, ‘faith that works’ (1:22). Hearing is essential but so is doing, in terms of obeying God’s commands and seeking God’s will. Doing has its dangers, especially when it comes to the tongue. James details the dangers of the tongue in chapter 3, where he concludes that blessing and cursing ought not to come from the same mouth. In chapter 4, conflict in the church appears to extend beyond words. James condemns proud and lustful hearts that are behind such conflict, appealing to the Christians to humble themselves before the Lord. Verses 11-12 do not seem to fit this context, but focus on the tongue continues. These two verses are about speaking evil to one another. Note that he is again referring to ‘brethren’ (4:11).

James gives a clear command in a format like that of the Ten Commandments: ‘Do not speak evil of one another’ (4:11). Some translate, ‘Do not slander one another’. The ninth commandment is, ‘You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour’. James has already referred to the ‘royal law’, to a summary of the second table of the Decalogue: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’ (cf. Lev 19:18, Mat 22:39). He gave this command as a reason for not showing partiality or favouritism. This same command is behind the command not to speak evil of a brother or sister; you cannot love them and speak evil of them at the same time. Although James goes into more detail regarding this sin.

In speaking evil you are passing judgment on your brother or sister. The apostle Paul argues in Romans 2 that, ‘In whatever you judge another you condemn yourself, for you who judge practice the same things’ (Rom 2:1)- he was pointing out to pagans, as well as to Christians, that they stand guilty before God. Jesus said, ‘Judge not, that you be not judged’ as he warns against hypocrisy (Mat 7:1). Speaking evil of a brother involves judgment on this person, and judgment must be based on some law.

The law of Christ is to love your neighbour as yourself, so in speaking evil you are in effect saying this command is not correct. You are saying, out with love and in with hate and revenge, maybe saying, ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’. You are being a judge of the law rather than a doer of the law (4:11). Laws, especially God’s law which is perfect, are to be obeyed not criticised or judged by us.

If you want to be a lawmaker then you are trying to usurp the Lord’s role as ‘Lawgiver’, the one and only ‘Lawgiver who is able to save and to destroy’ (4:12). The Law of the Lord is clearly stated in the Scriptures. This is the law by which the ‘Lawgiver’ will judge each and every person, including you. ‘Who then are you to judge your neighbour?’ asks James (4:12). Let us remember that God is sovereign and he makes the law. Our place is to keep his holy law. Satan tempted Eve into thinking she could be like God (Gen 3:5), and he continues to tempt us with the same lie. But we must resist the devil. We must humble ourselves before the Lord and speak good, not evil, of one another.

**2. Stop ignoring the Lord in your planning**

How is this topic related to the rest of this chapter? Like the verses we have just looked at, it relates to the tongue and to speaking. ‘Come now, you who say’ does signal a new section, but note the word ‘say’; later we will find the word ‘boasting’ (4:16). And let us not forget that words come from the heart, as Jesus says in Matthew 15:19: ‘Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts… false witness and blasphemies’. Evil thoughts give rise to evil words, as we saw in verse 11, and to planning our lives as if we were in control rather than the Lord.

James speaks of a businessman or woman who travels from town to town selling their wares. In the Bible we read of Lydia being a seller of purple from the city Thyatira- Paul met her in Philippi (Acts 16:14). It was common for Jews and others to make detailed plans regarding their business and making money, and some Christians were adopting such worldly ways. Some were saying they would go to such and such a place tomorrow, as if they were in control of time and travel. They would spend a year in this place buying and selling and making a profit, as if they were in control of the supply of their product and of the buyers, and that a year into the future!

James reminds Christians who have fallen into this trap that they do not even know what will happen tomorrow. They may fall sick, fire or flood may destroy their product or put a stop to their travel. In reality, they had no certainty whatsoever that their plans to make money would come to pass. In reality, their very life was in God’s hands. Their life was but a vapour, hardly a blimp in the history of the world. Job was brought to this realisation when his life was suddenly thrown into turmoil, not through any fault of his own (Job 7:7). The rich fool in Luke 12 tragically failed to realise this reality as he built bigger and bigger barns to store his harvest. James’ warning to businessmen applies to every situation in life, to everyone who plans for their life without consulting the Lord.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with making plans, of course. We do not wake up each morning and wait for a sign from the Lord telling us to go to work. If we have a job we go to work as a matter of duty and necessity, and we do our work as unto the Lord. We wake up on Sunday morning and go to worship as matter of duty and necessity also. It is not wrong to plan a holiday and book travel and accommodation in advance. But it is wrong to ignore the Lord and his will in such planning. It is wrong to follow your pagan friends in saying, ‘I go where I like, when I like, and do what I like’. It is wrong for you to think you are in control of your destiny, and to tell your children the same. This may be what they are taught in school, but you must teach them to seek the will of the Lord in their lives, just as you do. You must remind them of Proverbs 27:1, and of what James says here in verse 15.

“Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that’” (4:15). God in his sovereignty has purposed or willed whatsoever comes to pass (Westminster Shorter Catechism Q7). His will and purpose extends from the whole world to you and your life, and for eternity. You do not know what tomorrow may bring, but the Lord does! You should understand this when you pray, ‘Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’. Paul tells us not to be conformed to this world but live with renewed minds, that we may ‘prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God’ (Rom 12:2).

While James writes, ‘Instead you ought to say’, he does not want us to make this a meaningless ritual or mantra that we attach to everything we say. It is good to remind ourselves, and others, of our dependence upon the Lord by saying, ‘If the Lord wills’ or, ‘The Lord willing’, or *Deo volente* for those who speak Latin, but Paul does not say this on all occasions (Acts 18:21, 1Cor 4:19 cf. Acts 19:21, 1Cor 16:5,8). It was of course, his constant prayer, as it was of our Lord Jesus, to be doing the will of the Father at all times: ‘Father, not my will but yours be done’ (Luke 22:42).

The sovereignty of God in all things, including in the lives of his people, is a fundamental teaching of the Bible that is sadly neglected or twisted in much preaching today. Are we listening to the voice of the Lord or to the voice of Satan as we live day by day, month by month, and year by year; we do not even know if we will see tomorrow. And when the Lord does speak, be it through a pandemic, an illness, or maybe a war, do you listen and remember what we are learning today?

**3. Stop arrogant boasting**

‘To make plans without considering God’s plan is the same as arrogantly claiming to be in full command of the future’. James accuses these rich, or wanna-be-rich brethren of arrogance in making their plans without reference to the Lord whom they worship (4:16). They sounded just like worldly people as they boasted of their plans to make money. They had a business plan that assured them of making a profit. There is nothing wrong with having a business plan, but there is a huge step from plan to actual profit. Models and theories are one thing; reality is another. This huge step is under the control of almighty God, the God whom you ignore to your peril. God obviously controls the weather, controls your health and that of your family, and controls everything relating to your life. To arrogantly boast of your plans is to ignore the Lord at best, and to thumb your nose at him at worst. ‘All such boasting is evil’ and sin (4:16, 17).

Sins of omission are somewhat challenging, even to Christians. I was listening to a rabbi on the radio counselling a woman who felt guilty about things she had failed to say or do. He must have been old because his advice was to change the slide in her mind, to flick over from this negative slide to positive-thought slides. As Christians, we recognise sins of omission and we repent of them just as we do sins of commission; repenting before the Lord is much better than trying to change the slide in your mind!

Of course, giving up our pride is not easy, but the truth of Proverbs 3:34 is there for us to learn: ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble’. The rabbi made no mention of pride, humility, or grace. As Christians, we know God is sovereign in all things and we know the good we are to do (4:17); the Lord has given us his commands. Jesus told a parable in which a man knew his master’s will, namely to be a faithful and wise steward during his absence, but who failed to do this. ‘And that servant who knew his master’s will but did not …do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes’ (Luke 12:47). Jesus also condemns the rich man who failed to help poor Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). He did not harm Lazarus- he simply ignored him and was judged by God.

Here in the closing verse of this chapter, James is probably referring to the sin of failing to acknowledge the Lord in your planning, the sin of ignoring God in such matters. But what he says reminds us of the reality and the seriousness of sins of omission. We tend to focus on sins of commission, things we have said or done in disobedience to the commands of our Lord, as with the sin of speaking evil of a brother in verse 11. But failing to do what the Lord commands us, like failing to acknowledge him in all our plans and all our ways, is also sin. Having recognised our sin, let us repent before the Lord and ask for forgiveness, and for help in drawing nearer to him today and every day.

**‘For the love of money’** Text: James 5:1-6

Amos was among the sheep breeders of Tekoa; he was also a prophet. He spoke the word of God at a time when the economy of Israel was booming; but not for everyone. Prosperity brought corruption, both religious and moral. Prosperity for some came at the cost of the poor. ‘Hear this word, you cows of Bashan… who oppress the poor, who crush the needy’ (Amos 4:1). God sent all sorts of disasters to remind them of his sovereignty: drought, plagues, earthquakes, and fire, but they failed to take heed. Within thirty years, the northern kingdom of Israel had fallen into the hands of the Assyrians. While Amos prophesied against pagan nations, his main focus was on Israel, particularly the rich.

James also has words of condemnation for the rich. He has previously told the rich to be more humble, remembering that like a flower they will fade away (1:9-11). He has rebuked the church for showing partiality towards the rich, towards people who come to worship in costly clothes; he reminds them that the rich are the ones who oppress them (2:6). But his strongest words of judgment upon the rich are here in chapter 5. Some scholars argue that James is not speaking to Christians, but, like the OT prophets, condemns other nations or non-Christians. But we have just heard Amos condemning Israel! The rich he speaks to are wealthy landowners, but Christians can be landowners. Of course, the conduct of these rich landowners is not Christain, but men who call themselves Christians can be guilty of oppressing the poor. Many Christians were involved in the slave trade were they not?

Does James condemn everyone who is rich? Who is rich anyway? We will see that his teaching accords with that of Jesus, and of the apostle Paul. My Bibles refer to ‘rich oppressors’ in the title they give to this passage, but I have taken words from 1Timothy 6:10 as our title because James is not condemning only rich oppressors. His first judgment is upon those hoarding or heaping up wealth (5:3). The rich fool referred to by Jesus in Luke 12 simply hoarded his corn; there is no mention him oppressing his workers. So while James speaks of the rich oppressing their workers, rich people who do not oppress anyone are not off the hook! With these two points cleared up, let us move into the passage. James has four points of judgment: selfish hoarding, short-changing workers, self-indulgent lifestyle, and starving the poor to death.

**1. Selfish hoarding**

‘Come now’ writes James, just as he does in verse 13 of the previous chapter. There he was writing to people making business plans without reference to the Lord, people we concluded were Christians because they were to say, ‘If the Lord wills’. He progresses to people who have become rich, calling upon them to, ‘weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you!’ (5:1). He called upon the proud to do much the same in the previous chapter (4:9), although the onomatopoeic word ‘howl’ is even stronger. They are to howl because of the coming judgment. Picture the howling at the funeral of the rich man in Luke 12, or that of the rich man who failed to feed Lazarus a few crumbs from his table, crying out in Hades (Luke 16:19f). James reminds the rich that the luxuries of this earthly life will give way to miseries on the Day of Judgment.

We tend to hold our wealth in property, in ‘bricks and mortar’ as we say. In India, wealth is widely held in the form of gold jewellery. In ancient times gold was also popular, but so were expensive clothes. The rich man of Luke 16 was ‘clothed in purple and fine linen’ (Luke 16:19). Poor people had just one coat to keep them warm at night. If they gave this coat in pledge it had to returned at night (Exod 22:26, 27, Amos 2:8). How many coats in your wardrobe? India is known for its very hot summers, but poor people die in winters no colder than ours because they do not have a coat to keep them warm. Like a prophet, and like Jesus himself, James told the rich, ‘Your riches are corrupted/rotted and your garments are moth-eaten’ (5:2, Mat 6:19). I once took a sweater from my wardrobe to find moths had eaten holes in it- I should have given it away. In India we had a woollen carpet eaten by white ants while we were on holidays!

Gold and silver are synonymous with treasure, and markers of being rich. James speaks of riches being ‘corrupted’ or ‘rotten’, and gold and silver in particular as corroded. Jesus used the word ‘rust’, which literally eats up the metal, but not gold or silver. These precious metals do tarnish however, and Moses managed to ‘destroy’ the golden calf in the desert. Gold and silver can also be stolen. The point Jesus makes is that these are earthly, not heavenly treasure, a point which James also makes in referring to ‘the last days’ (5:3). His reference to fire also points to the end of this world. We are living in the last days, the time between Jesus first coming and his second coming. People who are told they only have a few days to live do not go out and buy a new house, do they? ‘You have piled up wealth in an age near its close’ is what James says.

Rust eats away at steel until all is consumed. Riches, or the love of riches, eats away at your soul until you are left ‘soul-less’, devoid of heavenly hope and treasure. James pictures riches as eating away at your flesh like fire. He also speaks of this ‘corrosion’ of riches as a witness against you (5:3). The rich man of Luke 16, who lived in luxury while ignoring the poor man at his gate, found himself being accused by Abraham of living a selfish life (Luke 16:25). Selfish hoarding of wealth, along with neglect of the poor man at his gate, was judged as sin.

Just as concerning for us living in a prosperous society, is the rich fool of Luke 12. This man did what we are told to do by our government, our financial advisors and even by Christians, namely, build bigger and bigger barns, as in bigger and bigger superannuation accounts. It is right to provide for ourselves and our families, and for our retirement, but let us be careful not to be accumulating riches above and beyond our need, or hoarding wealth. We always have needy brothers and sisters with whom we can share. Above all, let us not let the love of money lead us away from our Lord, and from the house of the Lord. If we have food and clothing, let us be content (1Tim 6:8, 10).

**2. Short-changing workers**

The rich being condemned by James were largely landed gentry. While it seems unlikely that Christians forced to flee Jerusalem because of persecution ended up as landlords, it is not impossible. While teaching rural development in India, I taught about the cycle of poverty. Education is key to escaping this cycle, but the person who escaped often went off to live a selfish life, or even came back to start oppressing his own people in order to get rich. While this should not happen in a Christian community, it is possible (Acts 4:34, 35, 5:2).

Christians or not, James condemns owners who fail to pay their workers a fair wage and pay them on time (5:4). Such conduct is all too common even today. Workers were paid at the end of each day; they may be paid in kind, going home with food for a meal. I have seen workers paid with a few handfuls of rice, and buying a tomato and an onion on their way home. To keep back their wages meant the workers went hungry. Sometimes workers got into debt and their wages were withheld to pay for this debt, at an exorbitant interest rate.

The matter of slavery becomes relevant in this context. The cries of the slaves in Egypt went up to the Lord, and he sent Moses to deliver them (Exod 3:7). It was the same within Israel when the rich started oppressing the poor, as we see in Amos, in Isaiah 5:7, in Malachi 3:5 and in Deuteronomy 24:14-15. The Lord saw the Pharisees oppressing widows, and condemned them (Mat 23:14). James called for widows and orphans to be helped, not exploited (1:27). He now condemns anyone who exploits their workers, saying that their cries have ‘reached the ears of the Lord Sabaoth’ (5:4). ‘Sabaoth’ is a transliteration of the Hebrew, which means ‘hosts’; it is ‘Lord of Hosts’ or ‘Lord Almighty’. God is the defender of the poor and this title reminds us that he is powerful to respond to their cries.

**3. Self-indulgent lifestyle**

James condemns the rich who ‘live on the earth in pleasure and luxury’, after condemning those who hoard wealth, and those who exploit their workers to enrich themselves. We have already referred to the rich man who failed to help poor Lazarus. This story is concerning because nothing is said about him oppressing poor Lazarus; he simply turned a blind eye to his need. James has just reminded us of sins of omission (4:17) and here is a classic case. We need to be careful when a poor person turns up at our gate that we do not turn away, especially if he is a fellow believer who we are able to help (Gal 6:10).

We also need to be careful not to get caught up in a worldly way of life, a life of self-indulgence and excessive consumption. We live in a society that has one of the highest rates of uptake for new technology; this began with colour TVs. We love to be buying new things all the time, which means throwing out old things all the time. We love to be going out all the time. Why? It is good to see how people live in other societies, especially poorer societies. But even in our society, my parents never went out for a meal! I do now, but not to luxurious places that serve the richest of foods and wines.

‘You have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter’ (5:5). James is not referring to the meat you are eating but to the judgment that is coming upon you who through gluttony have over-indulged the flesh (1Cor 11:21). It is said that the poor eat to live, while the rich live to eat! ‘Food for the stomach and the stomach for food’ is what Paul heard in the trading city of Corinth, but reminds us that God will destroy both (1Cor 6:13). While the poor die of malnutrition and starvation, the rich die of obesity! James speaks of the self-indulgent lifestyle as fattening one’s heart for judgment just as animals are fattened for slaughter (cf. Jer 12:3), this judgment being the final judgment, as experienced by the rich man in Luke 12, and in Luke 16.

As Christians, we must remember that our life here on earth is short, ‘even a vapour that appears for a little time and then vanishes away’ (4:14). We can work hard, day and night, to accumulate wealth, but we cannot take this with us when we die- and we will die and face the judgment (Ps 49:10, Luke 12:20). Let us not fall into line behind the rich hoarding their wealth and/or living in luxury every day. Do not even envy them, as the Psalmist was tempted to do, until he saw their end (Ps 73:17). James reminds the rich of, ‘miseries coming upon you’ and, ‘the day of slaughter’; let us take his warning to heart whether we are rich or poor.

**4. Starve the poor to death**

The final condemnation is, ‘You have condemned, you have murdered the just’ or ‘the righteous ones’ (5:6); NIV translates, ‘innocent men’. Moo says that this person is ‘a typical follower of God experiencing persecution at the hand of the wicked rich’. In what way do the rich ‘murder the just’? We know how Jezebel murdered the just man Naboth to get his vineyard, but murder is not always so obvious.

It is not yet two hundred years since William Wilberforce saw the ‘Abolition of slavery act’ pass into law. While it was not in the interest of slave owners to lose a strong slave, many slaves suffered and died at the hands of their owners. And just the other day I heard of Nepali workers dying because of working conditions at the new football stadium in the Middle East. Are innocent and defenceless workers dying in the manufacture of goods we are buying? Again, women and children come into view.

In too many societies, those who are poor and defenceless are being oppressed and exploited, and even murdered. James is not focussed on politics or society but on individuals like you and me because it is individuals, rich men and women, who will be judged if found guilty by the Lord of oppressing the poor and needy, or even of neglecting ‘righteous ones’ who cry to the Lord.

**Be patient, the Lord is coming** Text: James 5:7-12

‘Love, joy, peace, patience’: these are four fruits of the Spirit listed by the apostle Paul in Galatians 5:22. James begins his letter telling ‘brethren’ or fellow Christians that trials test our faith and produce patience or perseverance, and here in chapter 5 keeps urging patience. If John can be called ‘the apostle of love’, James could be called ‘the apostle of patience’! Having patience is the next step to perfection, and James declares a blessing on the man who endures trials and temptation! (1:3, 4, 12). Paul says that perseverance in the face of trials builds Christian character (Rom 5:3). Patience or perseverance should mark our lives as Christians, particularly as we remember how patient and longsuffering our Lord and saviour is with us!

Although patience and perseverance/ endurance are different Greek words, they are almost synonymous. Strictly speaking, ‘we are patient with other people, and endure difficulties’ (Moo). Being patient with other people means not getting angry. Perseverance or endurance is usually related to suffering of some sort. For example, Job was renowned for his perseverance (5:11), even though we speak about ‘the patience of Job’. Yet James speaks of the patience of the prophets.

In these verses, James urges brothers and sisters in Christ to be patient until the coming of the Lord. He does not promise them riches or an easy life in this world, any more than Jesus offered such things to his disciples. Jesus said, ‘In this world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world’ (John 16:33). The victory of Jesus is not necessarily seen today in a material way. In fact, we may suffer at the hands of rich people. James begins this section with ‘therefore’, linking it to the previous verses about rich oppressors. What James does promise is vindication of the righteous when the Lord returns in judgment, provided they persevere until the end.

James draws upon some examples as he urges the brethren to be patient, and as he points them to the imminent second-coming of the Lord. In his condemnation of the rich, he reminded them of the coming Day of Judgment. He now reminds the faithful believers of the same event, but for their encouragement.

**1. The farmer**

In ancient Israel, as in many societies today, everyone knew the farmers way of life. We get a glimpse of this on our TV from time to time, but many still do not understand the seasonality of crops. We can go to the cupboard and get a jar of canola oil at any time, but the crop that produces this oil is planted in the autumn and is harvested in the spring. The farmer plants the seed, waits for winter rains to water it, watches it grow and flower, and then goes in with his harvester. Anything can happen between sowing and harvesting; there may be no rain, or too much rain and a flood; pests or disease may destroy his crop, or Russian tanks might come tearing through his paddock! To be a farmer you have to be patient. He can complain about the weather, but, unlike many city dwellers, knows he cannot change it.

In Israel they planted on the October/November or early rains, and relied upon the March/April or spring rains to finish the crop off. When our daughter moved to the country and had only rain-fed tanks for domestic water, I told her not to worry if the water level fell at the end of summer because winter rains would fill her tanks. ‘Patience’, I told her, ‘patience!’

‘You also be patient’ said James (5:8). Do not worry but ‘establish your hearts’ or ‘stand firm’. We need patience in times of difficulty, such as when we are sick, or out of work, or our crops fail. Jesus says, ‘Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink’ because the Lord is able to supply all your needs (Mat 6:25, Phil 4:19, James 1:17). James is more focussed on affliction in terms of persecution, as the next examples will demonstrate, but the need for patient and perseverance is the same. Whatever the cause of the affliction, we look to the Lord and to him delivering us from our affliction. This is the cry of David in many of the Psalms, where his affliction was often persecution by enemies, or friends.

James encourages us to look to the Lord and to his coming or ‘*parousia*’ in particular (5:8). Rich oppressors give no thought to the end of the age, to the coming of Jesus on the clouds of heaven (Mat 24:30). They don’t even give thought to their own death (Luke 12:20). The ‘coming of the Lord’ means more than death of course; it means the day of judgment, the separation of ‘the sheep and the goats’ (Mat 25:32). This separation after death is pictured in Luke 16 with the rich man and Lazarus.

At the outset of his ministry, Jesus declared, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’ (Mat 4:17). James similarly assures his brethren that the coming of the Lord is near, and that at this time the Lord’s elect, who have endured suffering in this world, will be rewarded with the crown of life (1:12). Every time James calls us to be patient he points to this truth (5:7, 8), yet so many Christians forget this truth. A time of persecution will surely remind us of this truth!

Our conduct during times of difficulty may not be that of patient endurance. What did the children of Israel do when Moses led them into the desert? They grumbled against him; even his own sister grumbled (Numb 12). Sadly, ‘grumbling against those who are close to us is particularly likely to occur when we are put under pressure, or are facing difficult circumstances’ (Moo). If poverty and/or persecution was being experienced by the Christians James was writing to, they may well have started grumbling against one another (5:9) - despite their being in the same boat as it were. I fail to understand why marriages fail because of financial difficulties; splitting up never solves the financial problem.

Grumbling against others is not always rational, but it is always wrong. James warns the brethren that grumbling is the opposite of patience, and something the Lord will judge. Jesus is the judge, not us (4:12). Jesus said, ‘Do not judge or you will be judged’ (Mat 7:1). ‘The Judge is standing at the door!’ writes James (5:9). Jesus will judge in righteousness, or judge justly, and without partiality. His judgment will begin in the house of God (1Peter 4:17).

**2. The prophets and Job**

Jesus often drew upon farming scenes in his teaching, and he also drew upon the Scriptures themselves. James does the same. Jesus spoke about the prophets being persecuted and their reward being in heaven (Mat 5:12), and James does the same. He expected ‘my brethren’ to know about the OT prophets, men like Isaiah and Jeremiah. Can we expect Christians today to know about these men? They won’t if they don’t read the OT or hear it preached!

Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet for good reason. His preaching of the word given him by the Lord brought the ‘rewards’ of being put in the stocks, thrown into prison, and into a dark, damp dungeon (Jer 20:2, 32:2, 38:6). But Jeremiah pressed on despite this terrible suffering. Jeremiah was a man just like us, so let us learn from his patience in suffering. Our Lord Jesus is, of course, the supreme example of suffering at the hands of sinful men in this fallen world.

In a beatitude upon you when ‘they revile and persecute you’ Jesus said, ‘Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven’ (Mat 5:11, 12). We are reminded of his words in the upper room shortly before his crucifixion: ‘Be of good cheer’ (John 16:33). In this beatitude Jesus points to the example of ‘the prophets who were before you’. James also points to the example of the prophets and their suffering when he comments, ‘As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered’ (5:11 NIV).

James’ emphasis on perseverance continues as he turns to another OT character, namely Job (5:11). He does not go into detail about the suffering of Job, but we know it was not from wicked men; it was from Satan himself, with God’s permission. He did experience a lack of compassion from his ‘brothers’ which may have seemed like persecution! But the lesson of Job is his perseverance. He did not despair and take his own life, as his wife told him to do (Job 2:9). In the end, not the eschatological end that James is talking about but the latter part of Job’s life, the Lord blessed Job with even more than he had before (Job 42:10,12).

James expected his readers to know the Bible story of Job, including this end intended by the Lord (5:11). This shows us that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful, just as he declared himself to be to Moses (Exod 34:6). In this self-revelation to Moses, the Lord also said that he is longsuffering or slow to anger, and forgiving. If the Lord himself is longsuffering, as he surely is with us, should we not be longsuffering or patient towards others?

‘But above all, my brethren’ we hear James saying in verse 12. These are his concluding words, although many commentators consider this verse separately, or as belonging to the concluding exhortations. But recall what James said about grumbling back in verse 9. What happens if we are not patient? We grumble and complain. We might even get angry and might even want to ‘have it out’ with those who have wronged us, or continue to oppress us. What do we do if the boss fails to pay our wages (5:4)? Do we quietly take our case to the Lord, or do we get angry with him or her? And in our anger are we tempted to swear or curse?

‘In your anger do not sin’ warns Paul (Eph 4:26). He is actually quoting Psalm 4:4, a psalm James would have known. In any case, James knew what Jesus said about letting your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’, and your ‘no, ‘no’ (Mat 5:33-37). He more-or-less quotes what Jesus said. Besides, a major theme of this letter is that of controlling the tongue.

Jesus did not declare a total ban on taking oaths. There is a right and proper place for speaking under oath. But most of our oath taking is not in the right and proper place. Rather, it is within the context of our being upset and angry. Sadly, some Christians resort to taking the Lord’s name in vain, just like the ungodly when they are angry. And being wronged by someone is reason to get angry, unless, unless we take a deep breath, and remember whose we are and whom we serve. We should remember the words we have just read about being patient and establishing our hearts. We should remember how the prophets persevered despite the verbal and even physical assault of the enemies of God. We could also remember David, who never took matters into his own hands, but acknowledged that vengeance belongs to the Lord.

So let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’, and your ‘no’, ‘no’, because, as Jesus says, ‘Whatever is more than these is from the evil one’ (Mat 5:37). What James says is, ‘Lest you fall into judgment’ (5:12). Rich oppressors have been warned about the judgment of God. But as we have said before, judgment will be impartial. If we fail to see the bigger picture when we face trials, the picture that includes the return of Jesus in all his glory and the justice that belongs to his kingdom, we may get caught up in angry responses and vengeance. This may only be verbal, but words of cursing and swearing will bring us before the Lord for judgment.

**Prayer for the sick** Text: James 5:13-15

Many years ago a poor village lady came to us with her sick newborn. In India many babies die, but this little one was still alive. The mother had taken him to the village ‘quack’ but he was getting worse not better. We prayed with the mother before putting her in the car and driving her and the baby to the hospital. In fact, we prayed all the way saying, ‘Jesus, Jesus all will be okay’; this was the limit of Hindi at the time! Treatment at the hospital saved the baby’s life, for which we gave thanks and praise to the Lord. The next week the mother came to tell us she believed in Jesus and had thrown all the idols out of her house. So we set about teaching her songs of praise and the truths of the Bible. Medical ministry has been, and still is, a ministry through which many come to believe in Jesus.

Jesus himself was a healer. He went through towns and villages, ‘preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every sickness and disease’ (Mat 9:35). When the kingdom of God comes in its fullness, there will be ‘no more pain’ and ‘no more death’ (Rev 21:4). Until that time we live in a world where people, both believers and unbelievers, get sick. We live a world, or part of the world, where many diseases and sickness can be cured with medicine or surgery. But still we have sickness which doctors cannot cure. Jesus cured any and every kind of disease when he saw faith (cf. Mat 13:58).

Moreover, Jesus sent out the Twelve with power to cast out demons, and anoint the sick with oil and heal them (Mark 6:13). The apostles healed the sick, but Paul left Trophimus sick in Miletus (2Tim 4:20), and Paul himself had an ongoing ‘thorn in the flesh’ (2Cor 12:7). The apostolic age has ended, but we still believe the Lord is powerful to heal our bodies, as well as save our souls. James is more focussed on the latter of course, but both are ultimately related to sin and the Fall.

With this brief introduction, let us look at what is written by James, asking the Lord to help us understand and obey. His focus in these closing words of his letter is on prayer. He began his letter saying, ‘Let him ask in faith, with no doubting’ (1:6), and now at the end he writes, ‘The prayer of faith will save the sick’ (5:15). These verses are not easy to translate or interpret. I came across a report to Synod in 1994 dealing with James 5:13-18, and recently contacted a PhD student studying these same verses. Charismatics have their interpretation, and Catholics have theirs, but even evangelicals differ in their understanding.

James firstly urges us to pray when we are troubled or afflicted. Secondly, he urges us to sing psalms when cheerful or happy. And thirdly, he teaches us what to do when anyone in the church falls sick. Prayer is a privilege, and a necessity if we are to receive the blessings of the Lord.

**1. Pray when troubled**

James does not waste words here in these closing verses. He asks clear questions and gives straight answers, even if we struggle to understand what he says. His questions concern practical matters, the first being the question of suffering or affliction. He was writing to believers facing ‘various trials’ and experiencing a lot of suffering (1:2, 5:10). He had just urged them to be patient like the prophets, and like Job who endured a lot of suffering. Their suffering was from physical and mental persecution, and from sickness. Job also faced the loss of his property, and of his family in a storm. Whatever the form of suffering that we face, we are told to pray (5:13).

Jesus prayed, and he taught his disciples to pray, ‘Your will be done’ and ‘deliver us from the evil one’; the evil one was behind Job’s suffering. Jesus prayed in Gethsemane when he was about to face physical suffering and death because of our sins; his prayer included these words: ‘Father… not my will but yours be done’ (Luke 22:42). Peter was in prison when constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church; Paul and Silas prayed when in prison, and also sang hymns (Acts 12:5, 16:25). Paul often ends his letters either praying, or calling upon us to pray: ‘Pray without ceasing (1Thess 5:17).

Is James only referring to suffering for the sake of the gospel? We often suffer because of our sin, in which case our prayer will include a plea for forgiveness. At the same time, we as believers are not immune from natural disasters; remember Job, and also Paul who was shipwrecked three times (2Cor 11:25). What should we pray when we are suffering? Is it wrong to ask for deliverance from suffering? It is natural to ask for deliverance, for the Lord to remove a ‘thorn in the flesh’, but it is a mark of our spiritual maturity to pray for strength to endure the suffering with a godly spirit (5:11).

**2. Praise when happy**

As believers, we do not go looking for trouble or suffering; persecution will come our way if we are living as faithful followers of Jesus. But so will times of joy and happiness. We should not feel guilty at such times! We should be thankful and sing to the Lord. ‘Sing psalms’ is what James tells us to do. Psalms are found in the Bible so are the inspired words of God. There are various types of psalms; many express praise. When the psalmist receives an answer to prayer, he praises the Lord.

James does not stipulate singing psalms with others, but this is the natural thing to do when we are cheerful or happy. Let us not be like so many who neglect to return thanks to the Lord after receiving his blessing. Our happiness comes when the Lord blesses us: ‘Every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father of lights’ (1:17). Too many are like nine of the ten lepers that Jesus healed (Luke 17:11f).

**3. Prayer by elders when sick**

James distinguishes sickness from the suffering spoken of in verse 14 (5:14). His answer to sickness is the same, namely prayer, but he directs the elders of the church to pray over the sick member of the church: ‘anyone among you’ points to a fellow believer (5:14). This is the first mention of elders (*presbuteros*) by James, but we read of Paul appointing elders in every church and indeed, of setting down qualifications for such elders (Acts 14:23, 1Tim 3). Paul addresses ‘the elders and deacons’ in his letter to the Philippians, as does Peter in 1Peter 5:1. All the churches, it seems, had elders.

Elders are men mature in the faith and worthy of respect, able to teach and able to rule or lead. Their faith and knowledge of God’s word helps them in discerning the will of God. Teaching and leadership are gifts of the Spirit but there is no ‘aligning’ of spiritual gifts and position or office in the church. James does not refer to a gift of healing as such; Paul only refers to such a gift in 1Corinthians 12:9, 28. Some scholars think the word ‘sick’ refers to ‘spiritual weakness’, but most understand it as physical illness. It is a sickness that confines a person to their bed, with the person calling the elders to their bedside.

The elders will pray over the sick person, ‘anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord’ (5:14). James goes on to speak of the ‘prayer of faith’ that ‘will save the sick’- we will come to this shortly. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, and this is the pattern we can all follow, including elders. We pray to ‘our Father in heaven’, the almighty creator of heaven and earth and of us, and the sovereign Lord or King of all his creation. With God ‘nothing is impossible’ (Luke 1:37). We pray in the name of Jesus (John 14:14), and receive what we ask for if it is according to will of God (1John 5:14).

The matter of anointing with oil had been, and continues to be, the subject of much debate. The first question is, ‘What was the nature and the purpose of this anointing?’ The second concerns its validity today. While anointing with oil is widely referred to in the OT, the only reference in the NT to anointing with oil for the purpose of healing is in Mark 6:13. The Samaritan poured oil and wine on the wounds of the man who was attacked by robbers (Luke 10:34). There are two Greek words for anointing but analysis of their use does little to help - neither is used in relation to healing apart from Mark 6 and here in James 5. The Samaritan did not ‘anoint’ but ‘poured on oil and wine’.

Yet the reference to anointing the sick person with oil suggests some medicinal value in the oil. Indeed, it leads many to conclude that God heals through both ‘penicillin and prayer’. I like this phrase and agree that the Lord blesses the use of medicines to heal the sick; like all science, he made what man ‘discovers’ and uses for healing. But verse 14 refers to oil, probably olive oil, not penicillin, and it is used to anoint, not drink or inject. While scholars refer to the ancients using oil for healing, I can tell of my own experience of being given castor oil as a laxative! If anointing with oil includes rubbing it in, there may be some medicinal value but this is a big ‘if’. The only practical value of anointing with oil would be that of a tangible or physical expression of concern, or ‘to stimulate faith in the sick person’ (Moo); in other words, of pastoral rather than medicinal value.

The second suggested purpose of anointing with oil is as something religious, either a sacrament or something symbolic. The Roman Catholics base their sacrament of extreme unction on a misunderstanding of this verse. This ritual is supposedly to remove the last sins of the dying person; it is not intended for healing! As something symbolic, anointing with oil may indicate the setting aside of the sick person for special attention from the Lord. Anointing people and things in the OT symbolised their setting apart or consecration; although in the NT this is usually done with the laying on of hands and prayer (Acts 6:6). In any case, the healing or saving that results is because of ‘the prayer of faith’ not the anointing done ‘in the name of the Lord’. Whenever Jesus healed it was with power that went out from him, through touch yes, but not because of the oil or clay (John 9:6).

The Christian who is sick and bedridden is told to call the elders who will pray over him a ‘prayer of faith’ that will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up’ (5:15)- the word translated ‘prayer’ is different in verse 13 and 16. The word here in verse 15 can refer to a solemn promise or vow. Calling the elders is an act of faith in itself. It reminds us of Jesus asking, ‘do you want to be healed?’ or, ‘do you believe that I am able to do this?’ (Mat 9:28, Luke 18:41).

The elders should be men ‘full of faith and the Holy Spirit’, as Stephen was (Acts 6:5). Being full of faith means knowing and believing in Jesus Christ and what is written in the Bible. There is no point in praying for healing if you do not believe the Lord is able to heal. James uses the word ‘save’, which often refers to healing (Mat 9:21). Besides, to be ‘raised up’ points to a person who is lying down getting up from his bed when healed by the Lord - a physical rather than spiritual healing?

Does James promise the ‘saving’ or ‘raising up’ of every person who the elders pray over? Is this an unconditional promise? We have already seen that Paul left Trophimus sick in Miletus, and he himself was not healed of his ‘thorn in the flesh’. But James says, ‘The prayer of faith will save the sick’ (5:15). Is the question of faith a condition? Some say it is and conclude that if the person is not healed then faith is lacking, presumably on the part of the elders praying. Such a conclusion is not warranted and can have a tragic outcome; people go off to ‘whip up more faith’, or just whip themselves! Faith is believing God is able to heal- that is all. Whether or not it is his will to heal is another matter, a matter that only the Lord knows, unless he chooses to reveal his will.

In prayer, as in all of life, we must understand that God is sovereign, that his ways are higher than our ways’ (Isa 55:9). The prayer of faith acknowledges the sovereignty of God. If he chooses to reveal his will to discerning elders, they will pray accordingly (Rom 12:2). The sovereign purposes of God extend beyond our physical well-being, as Paul learned (2Cor 12:9, 10). God will be glorified through wonderful healing, but he may also be glorified through our patient endurance, or even our death. I have seen a man become a believer after the death of his wife.

The last sentence in verse 15 refers to sin being forgiven, but note it begins with ‘if’. Most Jews thought that sickness is God’s punishment for sin. Job’s friends believed this, as did the Jews pointing to the man born blind: ‘Who sinned, this man or his parents?’ (John 9:2, 3); Jesus said, ‘Neither’. It remains however, that the Lord can and does discipline those he loves, and sickness may be part of such discipline (Heb 12:6, 1Cor 11:30). So if the sick person who has called the elders of the church has committed sins, it is necessary that he repent and be forgiven if he is to be healed. Sin and sickness can be related. Our physical well-being can be related to our spiritual well-being.

May the Lord give us the wisdom to understand how he made us, and not make the matter of healing simpler, or more perplexing, than it truly is. May we know His grace in giving us faith, in forgiving our sin, and in healing our bodies when we are sick!

**Confession and prayer in the church** Text: James 5:16-20

When the Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples at Pentecost, as promised by Jesus, they preached Jesus Christ, crucified and risen from the dead. They called upon the people to repent and be baptised; these new believers received the gift of the Holy Spirit. They gathered together in a fellowship called the church. In this fellowship they listened to the apostle’s teaching, they prayed, they ate together, and they shared in the sacraments.

This fellowship or church belongs to Christ; he is head of the church. This church is for the glory of Jesus Christ. ‘I will build my church’ said Jesus (Matt 16:18). Tragically, the church became an institution with the pope as the head, until the Reformation. But even evangelical and Reformed churches can become institutions. When a church neglects the apostle’s teaching and/or prayer, it is neglecting what is central to the church, the body of Christ. Revival in the church is always marked by earnest prayer, individual and communal prayer. It is also marked by confession of sin because sin, unconfessed sin, is a barrier to prayer: ‘If I regard sin in my heart the Lord will not hear’ (Ps 66:18).

James is writing to a church facing trials of various kinds. He calls upon believers to patiently endure affliction. He also addresses problems in their fellowship, including arrogance, envy, and favouritism, along with exploitation, covetousness, and general worldliness. As he closes this letter or sermon, his focus is on prayer because prayer is not only unique to the church, it is essential to the church. When people gather at the football or at the club you do not see them in prayer, and certainly not confessing their sins; most likely they will be boasting to their mates. There is little by way of depth in worldly gatherings. What about our gathering here in church, as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ?

James says that if we are getting on fine, then let us praise God, but if we are suffering, then let us pray (5:13). He tells the person who is sick to call for the elders of the church to pray over him, and the Lord will raise him up (5:15). James points to a possible connection between sin and sickness in saying that if he has committed sins he will be forgiven. With this connection in mind, James tells the church to confess their sins to one another and pray for one another, ‘that you may be healed’. He does not leave us with the idea that the prayers of the elders or of priests are more effective than the prayers of other believers.

The closing verses of this letter focus on prayer. James adds the matter of confession of sin in verse 16, and of counsel of the sinner in verse 19. Our subheadings are: ‘Confession and prayer for healing’, ‘Consider Elijah’, and ‘Counsel and prayer for salvation of a soul’.

**1. Confession and prayer for healing**

Sin has the effect of separating us from God because God is holy. Separation means God does not hear our prayer. The psalmist wrote, ‘If I had cherished sin in my heart the Lord would not have listened’ (Ps 66:18). Confession of sin is an essential part of prayer. Jesus taught us to pray, ‘Forgive us our sin, as we forgive those who sin against us’ (Luke 11:4). Sickness may or may not be because of sin, but either way, the Lord will not hear our prayer if we cling to our sin.

None of us is beyond sin. The lusts of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life tempt us all (1John 2:16). Temptation begins in the heart, where it can be overcome in the power of the Holy Spirit (1:14). All sin is against God, so we must confess our sin to God (Ps 51:4). Some sin includes other people, so we must also confess to them; ‘Confess your sin to one another’ is what James writes (5:16). Jesus similarly tells us to be reconciled to one another before going to worship God: ‘Agree with your adversary quickly ‘(Mat 5:24, 25). Confess literally means to agree or acknowledge something said or done to hurt your neighbour. Maybe there is something your neighbour has said or done to you, in which case go to him or her and tell them (Mat 18:15).

Confession and forgiveness of sin is unique to the church because only in Christ can we know the forgiveness of sin. We do not go to secular courts to settle our differences; we go to God in prayer. Do you know the blessing of receiving forgiveness from a fellow believer and from God when you confess your sin? If not, let me suggest that you bring the problems you are having with your husband or wife before the Lord, together in prayer!

This is the only place in the Bible where confession and prayer together is taught. Some churches promote communal confession and prayer, and as we have said, revivals are marked by confession of sin and prayer. But does the whole church need to hear about your sin against another person? If you listen to one another, and are reconciled in the Lord, there is no need to tell it to the church (Mat 18:15). If your sin has brought harm or shame to the body of Christ then confess to the body of Christ, to the church, that you may be healed.

‘Pray for one another’ (5:16); the word translated ‘pray’ means to petition or ask for something. Samuel said, ‘Far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you’ (1Sam 12:23). Jesus prayed for his disciples. Paul prayed for all the saints and urged them to pray for him (Eph 1:16, 6:17, 18, Phil 1:4, Col 1:3). James extends prayer by elders to ‘praying for one another’. Pray must be a centre of our daily life if we are followers of Christ. In the fellowship of believers we confess our sins and we pray; we share our concerns in prayer. When prayer points are called for in a meeting, many will ask prayer for someone who is sick. This is good, but we can also share other concerns, like children’s studies or children professing faith in Christ. We will see the priority for saved souls over healed bodies in the last verse.

Some think the healing referred to here in verse 15 is spiritual healing. The word translated ‘healing’ can be used figuratively of deliverance from sin but the context here is physical healing, the ‘raising up’ of the bedridden person (5:15). When you learn that a fellow believer is sick, do you stop to pray for the Lord to heal this person? The elders are tasked with visiting the sick but this does not stop you from visiting to pray for them- especially if you have ongoing differences with that person. There is nothing on earth like hearing someone you ‘hate’ praying for you. As Peter says, ‘Love covers a multitude of sins’ (1Peter 4:8, Prov 10:12). Love has its own healing power but only the Lord can truly forgive sins and truly heal our sickness (Ps 103:3).

**2. Consider Elijah**

James concludes his exhortation to pray for one another saying, ‘The effective and fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much’ (5:16). Again, this prayer is one of petition or pleading. A righteous man is a person who is saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ, and whose sins are covered, and who stands righteous in Christ before God; this is every believer. When the prayer of this believer is ‘energised’ by the Spirit of God it is most effective in terms of getting a favourable answer; ‘it avails much’ (5:16). James leaves us in no doubt as to the power of prayer, or more correctly, the power of God to answer our prayer.

‘Elijah was a man just like us’ (5:17 NIV). James knew the Bible. He points to Job as an example of patience in suffering, and now points to Elijah as a man of prayer. Elijah was a prophet of God during the reign of Ahab and his pagan wife, Jezebel. James assures us that Elijah was not ‘superhuman’ but a person just like you, assuming you believe in God and pray. Elijah ‘prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain’ (5:17). The literal reading is ‘prayed a prayer’, an intensification translated as ‘prayed earnestly’. This was not a casual or ritual prayer. We don’t just say prayers, we pray prayers.

While the OT does not record Elijah’s actual prayer, it does refer to a severe drought declared by Elijah (1Kings 17:1), as does Jesus in Luke 4:25. After the showdown with the prophets of Baal on Mt Carmel, Elijah had his servant look towards the sea for a cloud. Sure enough, black clouds appeared, bringing heavy rain that broke the drought. It is interesting that James does not refer to Elijah praying over the widow’s son and raising him up, but to his prayer to stop the rain. It is certainly an example that speaks to us today when so many, even Christians, fail to acknowledge God’s power over meteorological events. The words of Thomas Manton in 1693 still ring true, ‘This is the bridle that God has put upon the world; the ordering of the weather is one of the most visible testimonies of his power and goodness’.

James reminds us that God answered Elijah’s earnest prayer for rain, and, ‘The earth produced its fruit’ (5:18). The Lord sent rain in Elijah’s day and he continues to send rain today. He does so as he graciously provides food for all his creatures, including us.

**3. Counsel and prayer for salvation of a soul**

Early in this chapter James urged ‘my brethren’, as in fellow believers, not to grumble against one another (5:9), and in this passage to ‘pray for one another’ (5:16). Now he urges his brothers and sisters in the faith to counsel one another. His words are, ‘if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back’ (5:19). James is referring to the sin of apostasy, of a believer turning away from the Lord. Yet note the ‘if’; he is not saying believers can be lost. What he is saying is that someone who knows the truth and believes in Jesus can backslide or wander from the truth. In their suffering, or more likely in their prosperity, they show more affection for the world than for the Lord. James does not mention prayer as such but John does (1John 5:16), and so does Jesus (Luke 22:31) with regard to brothers being attacked by Satan. Job’s counsellors give some good advice, but could have spent more time praying for this brother.

While it is important to ‘pray for one another that you may be healed’, it is even more important to pray for souls of brethren who are falling away or wandering from the path of truth. This may be as obvious as in their failure to attend public worship (Heb 10:25), in their lack of interest in prayer and fellowship with God’s people. This person may be in our own family; it may be our own spouse. As a young believer I prayed for my father to be saved, and the Lord saved him. I prayed and continue to pray for our children and their children. I pray for you as a member of this church, not just when you are sick and need the Lord’s healing mercies but when you show signs of wandering from the truth. I pray and I urge you from the word of God to return to the Lord and to the fellowship of his people.

How tragic it is to see some who professed faith in Christ turning away from Christ. Peter likens this to a pig having been washed then returning to the mud (2Peter 2:22). James urges us to make every effort to turn a brother or sister back from the path to destruction. ‘Let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins’ (5:20). Death of the soul means eternal destruction in hell.

Our walk with the Lord, and with that of our brother or sister in Christ, is not a walk in the park; it is like climbing Mt Everest. There are dangers at every turn so we must remain bound to one another, and bound to the Lord with cords of love and forgiveness; the ‘bonds of the gospel’ as our elder Alex says. Let us not be responsible for anyone wandering from the truth but let us be responsible for bringing them back, knowing God’s grace in forgiveness and in covering a multitude of sins.

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