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The Book of James

A Practical Bible Commentary by Terry Baxter



James, the half-brother of Jesus, was the leader of the church in Jerusalem. He was affectionately known as “old camel knees” because of the amount of time he spent in prayer. His book boldly encourages us not to let anyone or anything steal our joy or wreck our love for Jesus. Trials, temptations, the devil, or other people will try to sabotage it, but resisting the devil will cause him to flee. James bluntly tells us that true faith accomplishes things. It gets results. It moves mountains and fills in valleys. It feeds the hungry. It builds churches, hospitals, and schools. Faith strengthens the weak, heals the sick, and reaches the lost. Faith is the winning edge, the doing edge, and the finishing edge. Faith has hands to work and feet to move. Faith is believing that God can and will do what He promises. Faith steps out expecting God to step in. Sometimes faith is the only reason to do something when all else looks hopeless and impossible. Biblical faith is anchored in the person and work of God. Faith is not measured by how big we are, it is measured by how big God is.

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Mint and Chocolate Ice Cream: James 1:1

“James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: Greetings.”

We now turn our attention to the book of James. This book has a totally different flavor than Paul's writings. In fact, the difference is so dramatic it is like switching from chocolate to mint ice cream. Despite the very different flavors, they are both ice cream.

God used around 40 inspired human authors to write the Bible, but the finished product is one unified book from beginning to end. God was the one breathing out His Word through them. The following texts capture this thought about the inspiration of the Bible. (See 1 Peter 1:10-12, 2 Peter 1:16-21, 2 Peter 3:14-16, 2 Timothy 3:16-17)

The big question we need to answer is “Who is this James identified as the author of this book?” Nearly every scholar points to James the half-brother of Jesus. (Matthew 13:55) One reason is because the Apostle James, who was the son of Zebedee and brother of John (Matthew 4:21), was the first of the Apostles to be martyred. (See Acts 12:2)

Church history tells us that he became one of the most influential leaders of the Jewish Christian church at Jerusalem. (See Galatians 2:9) Tradition has it that he spent so much time in prayer that his knees became as calloused as the knees of a camel.

Notice that he addressed the letter to “the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad.” This book is the most Jewish book of the New Testament and fits well within the stream of wisdom literature from the Old Testament. Because James and Peter were ministry partners in Jerusalem, their letters have noted similarities. The book of James flows very well with the Gospel of Matthew and harmonizes with the Sermon on the Mount.

As you read this book, it gives a snapshot of the inner workings of the Christian Jewish Church in Jerusalem until it was mostly destroyed by intense persecution. James was the dominant figure in the Jerusalem church from A.D. 45 until his martyrdom in A.D. 62.

In no uncertain terms, James recognized the ministry of Paul to the Gentiles, but focused his own ministry on the Jewish community. (See Galatians 1:18-19; 2:9-10) He was also the respected voice that brought an end to the dispute at the Jerusalem council. (Acts 15:13) Read the full chapter to get the background to this groundbreaking council of early church leaders.

Why is this background important? It explains the difference between the writings of Paul and James. They were writing to radically different segments of the early church. One wrote to early Jewish Christian culture and the other wrote to emerging Gentile Christian culture.

The tension between these two groups was intense as illustrated by the Jerusalem council. There was also explosive conflict between Orthodox Judaism and the new Jewish Christian Church. Rome also injected its iron hand into the conflict. The church in Jerusalem endured much persecution at the hands of their Orthodox counterparts.

Ironically, it was the Gentile church that sent numerous financial gifts to help their Jewish Christian counterparts as persecution mounted. (See 1 Corinthians 16:1-4) As the Jewish Christians were eventually forced out of Jerusalem, they were dispersed all over the Roman empire. James and Peter both wrote to the dispersion of Christian Jews. Often they found refuge among Gentile Christians.

This came to a climax with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and the demolition of the Jewish Temple. Soon Rome turned its vengeance on all Christians. Miraculously, God used persecution to unite and unify the two flavors of the early Christian Church. This is a simple explanation of the origins of chocolate-mint ice cream and why it is calorie-free when served at church events.*

*(*GoServ Global denies any and all liability for claims of the existence of calorie-free ice cream of any variety, flavor, or brand whenever or wherever it may be served. –dj)*

Making the Most of Your Trials: James 1:2-4

“2) Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, 3) knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. 4) And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

James wastes no time getting to the point. He starts his book by talking about trials. His audience was going through intense persecution and trials. It would have been natural for them to ask; “If God loves me so much, why is life so difficult?” Do you ever feel that way? James poses some profound answers.

First, James implies that our attitudes affect the severity of our trials. It's true! Joy and a positive attitude will always tip the scale in your favor. A soft answer turns away wrath and speaking with kindness injects grace into the situation. Anger and harsh words always compound our problems and blurs our vision.

Second, James states that trials serve a positive purpose. They test our faith. Trials expose both our strengths and our weaknesses. They show where our faith and character have grown and expose areas in our life that need more grace and attention.

Third, James believed that trials cause us to grow and become stronger. The testing of our faith produces endurance, and endurance in turn will ultimately lead us to maturity and completeness. The ultimate goal is not what we accomplish in life, but rather who we become. No athlete or soldier can reach their potential without persistent training, workouts, and effort.

Finally, James suggests that trials can be either divinely designed or self-induced. Two words in the broader context have the same Greek root. They are the words “trial” and “temptation.” God can and does design trials to test our faith, but He does not tempt us to do evil. (See James 1:13-5) Let me give an example:

God does not design speeding tickets for our life, we bring those trials all by ourselves. But the good news is that the first three points can be applied to both trials and temptations. God causes all things to work together for good to those who love Him. (Romans 8:28) Personal failure can be a door to growth and future success.

The bottom line is that God is for us and not against us. He is actively working through our trials and struggles to move us toward growth and maturity. Start a new practice in life and make the most of your trials.

Seeking Wisdom and God’s Ways: James 1:5-8

“5) But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. 6) But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. 7) For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, 8) being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.”

When you read these verses, it is important to keep the context in mind. James was talking to persecuted Christian Jews who were fleeing Jerusalem and seeking new lives elsewhere in Gentile regions. Many were being pulled into worldly values and temptations because of Greek and Roman culture that was everywhere in these new regions. It was a radical departure from life in Jerusalem and Judea.

Nothing exposes our need for wisdom more than living in secular culture. It brings on huge temptations and trials. It causes us to either seek God, abandon God, or modify God to fit into our new circumstances. The latter two can be disastrous for a Christian.

The books of Psalms and Proverbs are known as “the wisdom books.” Wise men and women govern their lives with God in mind. They have a wholesome fear of God and study His Word to discover His will and learn His ways.

They also recognize the personal nature of God. That means God is knowable and desires to have fellowship and relationship with people. He watches over His own and guides them. He loves and cares for people and is a very present help in the time of need.

This translates to an invitation to seek God for wisdom as we go through life. This includes how to navigate problems and trials and make big life decisions. This also implies that God has a way of speaking to us. This is a huge concept and totally foreign to some people.

James comes back to this theme of wisdom in James 3:13-18. In these verses he draws a sharp contrast between heavenly wisdom and earthly wisdom. They are radically different and have totally different origins and outcomes. He goes so far as to say that natural wisdom is earthy, natural, and demonic.

The book of James actually postulates that living by natural wisdom might be the root source of our trials. Seeking God for wisdom is more than just asking for intervention in times of crisis, it is seeking Him for a new life and a new approach to living built on His ways.

In verses 6-8, James talks about asking in faith without any doubting. He warns against being double-minded. What is he talking about? I believe he is saying that it doesn't work to mix God's ways with the world's ways. When you live by worldly values you will reap worldly results and consequences whether or not you claim to know God.

When everything comes crashing down, you find yourself in the midst of huge trials. It doesn't work to treat God like a "get out of jail free card" and then when the smoke clears run back to your old worldly and sinful ways. That's called being "double-minded."

When you ask for wisdom you are asking God to show you His ways and His approach to life and living. You are not asking for a quick fix, you are seeking a "total life makeover" built on a new foundation. It means you are ready to turn your back on your own selfish ways and the world's ways to seek God and His ways.

The book of James is about to get very blunt and very practical. James emphasizes human responsibility in godly living. Though not stated directly, James was telling the Jewish Christians who were dispersed because of persecution to live like Daniel did in Babylon and not the majority who embraced Babylonian ways.

The High Cost of Living for Jesus Christ: James 1:9-11

"9) But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; 10) and the rich man is to glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. 11) For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away."

This is one of those texts we need to wrestle with in order to pin down the meaning. At first glance it looks like James favors poverty above financial success. But I do not think that is what he is talking about in this text.

The book of Proverbs talks a great deal about how lazy and undisciplined character can lead to poverty and how God blesses diligence, wise savings, and giving. James was not annulling this rich Jewish heritage. I personally believe there was a much deeper dynamic behind what James was saying in this text.

These verses need to be interpreted in light of their historical context. What do I mean? Well, James was writing to persecuted and dispersed Christian Jews. (See James 1:1) Many of them lost everything simply because they became Christians. Their humble circumstances came about as a direct result of their faith, proven character, and loyalty to Jesus Christ and the gospel.

This happens to Christians in the persecuted church in many places around the world today. Simply because they are Christians they can be denied education access, jobs, equal social status, career advances, legal protection, and be singled out for discrimination, physical attack, imprisonments, violence, rape, and be sold into human trafficking. Sadly, this is common in many communist and Islamic countries today. Some of these elements are also becoming increasingly more common in India and in very liberal and humanistic societies.

The temptation for these early Jewish converts was to be outwardly double-minded as the previous verses indicate. They could keep all their stuff and avoid social scorn and the resulting humble circumstances by not identifying with the Christians in public. The problem was that this resulted in terrible hypocrisy and it was motivated by the desire for wealth and social status. It dumped them into a very storm-tossed life. (Review James 1:6-8)

It now becomes clear what James was talking about. The believers who lost everything for the sake of Jesus and the gospel had a high position with God and eternal glory beyond imagination. To the contrary, he was warning those who built or preserved wealth in this life by bending their character or hiding their faith in Jesus that they faced a future humiliation beyond description.

James was warning against bartering away eternal glory for the sake of momentary pleasure, wealth, and fame in this life. He compared it to a blooming flower that lasts for a few weeks and then vanishes. He was not minimizing the virtues of godliness, hard work, or wise financial management taught in the rest of the Bible.

Keep in mind, this was James the half-brother of Jesus. He was also the carpenter's son. He understood hard work, blisters, calluses and providing for a family. He watched his older half brother model a solid work ethic when the family business was abruptly handed over to Him.

The trip to Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve is the last mention we have of Joseph in the Bible. (Luke 2:41-52) His demise is a mystery, but the role of family provider most likely fell on the shoulders of Jesus. This might also provide a clue as to what occupied His time up until He began His public ministry around age thirty. Note in Mark 6:3 Jesus was known as "the carpenter."

James undoubtedly also knew what it was like to lose the family business and be persecuted for the sake of the gospel. Ultimately, he also turned his back on what this world offers to become a leader in the church and a martyr for the sake of Jesus and the gospel.

I believe this embodies the historical tension James was exposing and dealing with in his book. He was writing to the suffering and persecuted church. Peter also picks up this theme in his two letters to the suffering church.

The bottom line is that the personal cost of being a devoted follower of Jesus Christ in this life is minimal compared to the surpassing glory that awaits the faithful in eternity. This is the only interpretation of these three verses that sets the stage for the next verse that explodes into the discussion.

The Glory of Perseverance: James 1:12

“12) Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.”

I was once ministering at a youth conference on the theme of dating standards and moral purity. During a question and answer time at the end, a testosterone-filled young man asked, “So, when I’m out on a hot date and get tempted, why not just have sex and then ask for forgiveness?” His logic was, “Why not have fun and walk with God as well?”

That’s one of those moments when you pause and silently and very quickly pray for wisdom. Then the thought hit me, “Because self-control is a fruit of the Spirit.” It comes down to being spirit-controlled instead of flesh-controlled. They are two radically different approaches to life.

So why do I share that story to illustrate this verse? Because that is basically what James is saying. There is huge value and blessing to persevering under a trial and not yielding to a temptation. He then gives three reasons.

First, persevering gains approval from God. Notice it does not say “acceptance.” We do not earn God’s acceptance. That is based on faith. But we can earn God’s approval and favor. I believe Psalm 4:3 is still true; “3) But know that the Lord has set apart the godly man for Himself, the Lord hears when I call to Him.” There are very tangible blessings to walking in faith with sanctification and obedience. Personal holiness is our calling in Christ. (1 Peter 1:13-16)

Second, persevering results in the crown of life. James uses a very interesting Greek word in this verse to describe the crown of life. Instead of using the word “bios” which means “biological life”, he uses the word “zoe” which means “spiritual life.” The process of being tested with trials and temptations eventually results in us becoming mighty in spirit as we learn how to persevere through grace and faith. Learning how to walk in the spirit instead of the flesh is a process of trial and error. Struggles eventually lead us to godly maturity.

Notice that I did not capitalize the word “spirit.” Though the Holy Spirit indwells the human spirit of the believer, the growth and maturity happens to the human spirit. Persevering changes us

into people of character and substance. The end purpose of our trials is becoming mighty in spirit. This is a glorious crown that the righteous will wear throughout eternity.

Finally, persevering demonstrates our love for God. It screams that we love Him more than riches, more than fame, more than pleasure, more than anger and revenge, more than pleasing others and at some point more than life itself. Our relationship and love for God can become greater than our love for anything this world has to offer.

I am not sure if the motivation in this verse is as much to “receive the crown of life” as it is to “become a crown of life” for the glory of God. He receives glory by what we become. The process James is talking about in this entire chapter is that of entering into or being crowned with “zoe life.” Spirit life becomes our new character.

The Blame Game: James 1:13-15

“13) Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am being tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. 14) But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. 15) Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.”

Years ago I settled the basic truth that God is for me and not against me. One of Satan’s oldest tricks in the book is getting us to blame God for our trials, temptations, and failures. This ploy is as old as time itself. Way back in Genesis 3:4-5 Satan set out to twist and undermine Eve’s view of God.

So James is very quick to lay the foundation of two universal truths about God that are central to understanding His character and nature. First, James says God cannot be tempted by evil. God is absolutely holy and good. God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all. (1 John 1:5) Let me underline the fact that this is only true of the God of the Bible. In comparative religions, we discover by contrast that all other gods have a bent toward evil or are devious in some way.

Second, James emphatically says that God does not tempt any one. That is Satan’s job description. He is so cunning and good at it that he earned the title of “the tempter.” And he is so crafty that he gets people to blame God for their temptations.

James then points out that people need to accept responsibility for their own actions. We are tempted because we have a problem with lust, fantasy, and evil desire. When lust is conceived, it gives birth to sin and when sin is acted out, it brings an inner dying and eventual physical death.

Please understand that sin is deadly. It is not just a bad habit. Do not minimize the consequences of sin. This was the battle line of Genesis 2-3. God told Adam that sin would bring about death. (Genesis 2:16-17) Satan convinced Eve she would not face death as a

consequence of her sin (Genesis 3:3-4) and then proceeded to quickly assign devious intent to God in the very next verse.

This has been the battle line within human morality throughout history. People do not want to accept personal responsibility for their actions or accept consequences. Yet accepting personal responsibility is the first step toward repentance, forgiveness, freedom, and personal transformation. This tension is the divide between biblical theology and secular psychology. It is the profound difference between Christianity and liberal humanism. Human depravity is a master at playing the blame game.

Do Not Be Deceived: James 1:16-18

“16) Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. 17) Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. 18) In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.”

In verse 16, James gives a very blunt admonition. He simply says, “Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.” The ten thousand dollar question is: “Do not be deceived about what?”

I firmly believe that context depicts meaning. In this case the context is two-fold. As you glance back in the context, James has been talking about trials and temptations. As you turn and fix your focus forward, he talks about the character and nature of God. When you tie the two together, I believe James is saying; “Do not be deceived about the character and nature of God as you weather the difficult storms of life.”

I cannot explain why bad things happen to good people. We live in a fallen world with disease, sickness, and wicked people. 2 Corinthians 4:3-4 warns us that Satan is the god of this world and he will do anything in his power to distort the gospel and twist our understanding of God. His goal in the book of Job was get Job to turn from God and curse Him.

In James 1:17-18, James is very adamant that every good and perfect gift is from God, and He is full of light and doesn't so much as cast a shadow through inconsistency. God is good and does not change. Satan is desperate to get you to question God and His love for you.

The bottom line is that you and your salvation are both gifts from God, and He will faithfully work through both the good and bad of this life to show you His love and grace. If the deceiver gets you to harden your heart toward God, where else can you turn? When you turn your back on love, light, truth, and grace, darkness and despair are waiting to welcome you with open arms. But do not be deceived, Satan's embrace is painful and deadly.

Don't Let Anger be Your Master: James 1:19-20

“19) This you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; 20) for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.”

James now points to a root problem that is responsible for many self-induced trials in our lives. Anger short circuits logic and reason. It is often connected to the mouth. It has a hair trigger and can cause untold damage. It can undermine relationships, destroy families, and lead to violence and death.

Cain killed his brother Abel because of anger. His anger was so bad his entire demeanor changed. In Genesis 4:5 God asked him, “Why are you angry?” In the next verse God warned him that sin was crouching at the door of his anger and wanted to take control of his life, but Cain had to master it.

So the obvious question is, “How can a person master or control anger?” I believe James offers some great insight.

First, in James 1:19 he says, “Be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger.” This is a profound principle. James is saying; “Keep your mouth shut when you are angry!” If you can adopt this simple rule it will save you tons of heartache and problems in your life. I have deleted many emails that I have written simply because I was angry when I wrote them. I needed some “cooling off” time. I needed to be slow to speak.

This problem of anger and the tongue is so serious that James devotes all of Chapter Three to the subject. We will unpack that subject at length when we get to that chapter.

Paul talked about anger in Ephesians 4:26-27. In that text he says “clean up the mess caused by your anger quickly before it has time to fester.” That’s great advice. He adopted the principle of not letting the sun go down on the fallout of his anger. He humbled himself and circled back quickly to ask forgiveness and make things right.

Second, in James 1:20 he says, “For the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.” This is a profound insight. James acknowledged that no action, cause, or agenda is from God if the underlying motivation is rooted in anger. Don’t use God to justify or excuse your anger. Anger is sin even when you feel your cause is right.

When these two verses are taken together we discover that anger can be both a reaction and a motivation. Let me restate that thought. James is saying that if anger is present then both your reactions to a person or situation and your motives behind a cause can be wrong.

Don’t waste your life where God is not working just because you are angry. Deal with your anger and get your life back on track with God even if it involves major damage repair and new life direction. Don’t let anger be your master. As a Christian, Jesus Christ should be your Master.

Winning the Inner War: James 1:21

“21) Therefore, putting aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness, in humility receive the word implanted, which is able to save your souls.”

I confess, I'm a bit old school. I believe James was as well. I see salvation involving both faith and obedience. Jesus did everything on the cross to pay for our sins and purchase our justification, but we need to turn from our sinful ways. We need to put aside all filthiness and all that remains of wickedness from our lives.

Repentance is vital to the sanctification process. It means turning from our sins. It is an about-face. Paul agreed with the importance of repentance. Listen to what he said; “19) Consequently, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision. 20) but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and then also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance.” (Acts 26:19-20) I can find no biblical basis of salvation that doesn't involve repentance and a change of direction in life.

The bottom line is that you need to repent from your sin. You need to stop serving your flesh and start serving God. You need to turn off your pornography and turn on your gospel music. You need to stop reading fantasy novels and start reading your Bible. You need to put off the deeds of the flesh and put on the fruit of the Spirit. (Galatians 5:19-24) You need to step up and win your inner war.

“In humility, receive the word implanted, which is able to save your soul.” James 1:21b) Your soul is the seat of your intellect, emotion, and will. You are responsible for the condition of your soul. Are you listening? You need to take control of your entertainment, your thought-life, your emotions, and your actions. This is your responsibility. God does not control how you manage and feed your soul. He provides grace and help, but you need to step up and win your inner war.

The Fruit is in the Follow-Through. James 1:22-25

“22) But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. 23) For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; 24) for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. 25) But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.”

There is a principle in life that says “the fruit is in the follow through.” The blessing and benefit goes to those who build daily discipline into their life. To be a hearer of the word and not a doer of the word is of no personal benefit. This is true for every area of life.

You can study nutrition, but if you don't change your daily diet it won't help. You can study physical fitness, but if you don't start a daily exercise routine it won't help. You can study finances, but if you don't start a regular and consistent savings program you will forever be broke and have no capital for investing. You can study gardening, but if you don't plant your seeds in the spring and deal with the weeds along the way you will spend your fall and winter begging for food or buying from others. God created amazing seeds with all the DNA to produce plants after their kind, but you've got to do your part and plant them in your garden.

The same principle works in your spiritual life. Hearing the word of God is a good starting point, but James says only the effectual doers will reap the blessings in their lives. God provides everything we need for life and godliness, but He expects us to build our lives on His Word. The Bible is full of principles for both the physical and spiritual realm, but the fruit is in the follow-through. Actions produce results.

So how long does it take to turn a life around and start reaping the results? The answer is: "about the same time it takes to plant a garden and start eating the produce." Radishes can move from seeds to your table in four to six weeks. Pineapples take a few years. Planting an apple tree takes more time, but the fruit can be picked every year once it starts producing.

Changing your attitudes produces blossoms really fast. Sowing deeds of kindness produces a steady harvest. Listening to people and sowing words of love, truth, and kindness can change a relationship within a few weeks. Pulling the weeds of greed, anger, and lust from your mind and meditating on Scripture you have committed to memory compounds quickly. Taking time for daily prayer and worshipful praise as you spend time with God is profound. I think you get the idea.

James says reading the Bible is like looking in a mirror. It shows areas of your life that need immediate attention. When looking in a mirror you can quickly and clearly see every pimple, blackhead, wrinkle, whisker, egg yolk on your face, and the color of your teeth. Seeing is merely the first step. Personal manicure is the follow through. Start immediately!

Become responsible for your own life. Study and learn the basics and then take action. Make changes. Start new daily disciplines. Stick with it. Deal with the weeds. The fruit is in the follow-through.

The Perfect Law of Liberty: James 1:25

"25) But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does."

James was not an advocate of passive Christianity. He believed in diligent study and intentional application of the "perfect law, the law of liberty." He believed in becoming an effectual doer of the Word of God and that blessings would accompany this kind of commitment and obedience. James focused on living out biblical principles in his daily life.

There are two traps that Christians fall into. The first trap is called “legalism.” This is a very mechanical approach to God and His word. It is illustrated by the Pharisees. They tried to earn their salvation by keeping every punctuation mark of the law. For them God's word became a law of slavery and not liberty. Instead of having a living and dynamic relationship with God, they were tied to a list of does and don'ts and an annual list of rituals and religious ceremonies.

The second trap is called “licentiousness.” (Jude 1:4) These were the people who viewed grace as a ticket to live and do as they pleased with no guidelines or moral boundaries. They practice lawlessness. They ended up despising the law and trampling it underfoot. They viewed Jesus as giving them the freedom to do whatever they pleased.

This led to a heresy called “antinomianism”, which is the rejection of laws and argues against religious norms and morals. James was writing to confront this heresy that was creeping into the early church. His book is a strong corrective voice against lawlessness.

It should be noted that Martin Luther rejected the book of James. He did not believe it harmonized with the writings of the Apostle Paul and the doctrine of Justification by Faith. Luther had been liberated from religious slavery in the Roman Catholic Church when he discovered the doctrine of grace. As a former monk seeking to earn his salvation through religious ceremony, his testimony was very similar to that of the Apostle Paul who was a former Pharisee. But James was by no means endorsing the kind of radical religious legalism that enslaved both Saul and Luther in their early days.

James had a very refreshing approach to the Old Testament Law. Keep in mind, the New Testament had not yet been written. He viewed the law as a window through which he could discover God and His ways. He used the law as a mirror to see his own sin and shortcomings. I believe he viewed the Christian life through the lens of Psalm Chapter One. He studied and meditated on God's word for the purpose of being planted by streams of living water. He wanted to know God better and live in His favor and blessings.

The Old Testament is amazing. In it God revealed Himself and His ways to mankind. The New Testament is also amazing. In it God provided His Son to redeem sinful humanity and give His precious Holy Spirit to everyone who turned to Him in saving faith by responding to His gift of grace.

James viewed the Christian life as the perfect union between knowing and obeying God through His word and walking daily by grace in the power of the Holy Spirit. James emphasizes turning the written word into daily living and thus welcoming God's blessings with open arms. He viewed the daily study of Scripture as the pathway for deepening his walk with God.

Religious but Lost: James 1:26-27

“26) If anyone thinks himself to be religious, and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this man’s religion is worthless. 27) Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

These two verses help illustrate the very blunt and practical nature of James. Keep in mind, he grew up in the home of Jesus as one of His siblings. He uses the word “religious” or “religion” three times in this context.

These two verses and Acts 26:5 are the only times this Greek word is used in the New Testament. In Acts 26:5 Paul says; “... that I lived as a Pharisee according to the strictest sect of our religion.” It has in it the idea of being devout and diligent in the performance of the divinely ascribed duties of outward service toward God. This word embodied the rigid performance of outward rituals or ceremonies that had little or no connection with someone’s inward character or nature.

James was actually rejecting this mechanical concept of spirituality and called it “worthless.” He rejected the notion that keeping a list of external ceremonies had anything to do with true salvation. In verse 26 he illustrates this by saying that the person who was devoutly religious but had a foul mouth was self-deceived. He went so far as to say that his or her religion was worthless.

I believe James got this from the teaching of Jesus. A quick review of Matthew 12:34-35 and Matthew 15:10-20 captures how Jesus viewed this subject. James rightly understood that the mouth merely revealed the true condition of the human heart. James 1:26 serves as a brief preview of James 3:1-12. Human depravity cannot tame the human tongue. Only a changed heart from grace and the indwelling Spirit of God can bridle the tongue.

Then James hit the nail one more time. In James 1:27 he said pure and undefiled religion shows up in the way you treat widows and orphans in their hardship and by not being inwardly stained by the world. The word “unstained” has in it the idea of no spot or unsightly mark. Again, James stressed inward virtue that showed up in sincere outward actions and deeds of service. It is noteworthy that Jesus focused His ministry on the very people the religious leaders either exploited, used, abused, or ignored.

Make no mistake, these two verses were a strong denunciation of the hypocrisy often associated with Orthodox Judaism. In fact, this same dichotomy shows up in every world religion. James would argue that Christianity is not a religion, rather it is an intimate and life-changing relationship with God that manifests itself in the way people live and act. In these two verses, James was holding external religion in contempt. It is possible to be religious but lost.

A Bumpy Transition: James 2:1-26

“1) My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. 2) For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, 3) and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, “You sit here in a good place,” and you say to the poor man, “You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,” 4) have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?”

Welcome to one of the best descriptions of an early church assembly in the New Testament. They did not have exotic buildings as we are accustomed to today. They either met in Jewish synagogues or in homes. In nice weather, they may have met in a courtyard that was so common in those days or in a large living room resembling the upper room where Jesus and His disciples celebrated the Passover.

The emphasis was on the body and not on the building. This was a radical departure from orthodox Judaism that focused on the Temple in Jerusalem and a hierarchy of priests, scribes, and the Rabbinical system. Leadership structure in the early church became very different from its Orthodox Jewish counterpart. Early on, this became one of the flash points between organized religion and the emerging church.

Jesus as the Lamb of God once and for all fulfilled the sacrificial system and became our High Priest mediator between God and man. There was no longer a need for a priesthood, an altar, or a place for burnt offerings. In short order, God sovereignly removed the temple itself from Jerusalem.

The book of Hebrews does an amazing job of painting the insights and analogies between the Old Testament system and how Jesus fulfilled and replaced it. Everything from the Old Testament temple and sacrificial system to the festivals all had a spiritual application especially for the Jewish Christians.

The transition between the Old and the New became a juggling act for the Jewish believers. Early on many Jewish believers observed the Jewish calendar system with all of the holidays and ceremonies, but these were eventually spiritualized and used as teachable memorials.

The one thing that carried over was the instruction time and weekly gatherings in the synagogues. Early on, the Jewish believers met daily from house to house as described in Acts 2:41-47. Eventually persecution forced them into homes and history tells us they started meeting on the first day of the week rather than the seventh day to correspond with the resurrection day. Apart from that, the early church services in the Jewish segment of the church had the feel of meeting in a synagogue on the Sabbath.

The one problem that remained related to social status. Orthodox Judaism by its very structure honored and esteemed people of merit, status, and accomplishment. There emerged a very definite “in-crowd” of the very wealthy and influential people in Judaism and common people were despised.

Jesus Himself often scorned this system as noted in Scriptures like Matthew 23:1-36. As the Carpenter from Nazareth, Jesus constantly bumped against the wealthy religious hierarchy in Jerusalem. The entire religious system in Jerusalem had become very political.

James, who authored this book, was the half brother of Jesus and became a leader in the early Christian church emerging in Jerusalem. He vehemently fought against any form of social status hypocrisy taking root in the early Christian church. He understood its destructive influence and that it was totally contrary to the Christian value system of loving, affirming, and caring for all people. He was also an advocate of "Servanthood Leadership" as taught by Jesus.

This background helps set the tone for James Chapter Two. You are about to discover a radically different value system for leadership and ministry. Unfortunately, I fear that the modern church has lost its way and is slipping into the same institutionalism that is so characteristic of man-made religion.

The Equality Principle: James 2:1-4

"1) My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. 2) For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, 3) and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, 'You sit here in a good place,' and you say to the poor man, 'You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,' 4) have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?"

One of the cardinal values of the Christian faith is, "equality and acceptance of all." It views all people as valuable and created in the image of God. The gospel is for young and old, male and female, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, sinner and saint. Jesus died on the cross to pay for the sins of all humanity. (1 John 2:2) It calls all people to repentance and faith and obedience toward God.

James applied this to the community of faith and the local church. He did not want the Christian assemblies to reflect the personal favoritism and social stigma so prevalent in human society. This was especially true along the lines of the rich and the poor. Both in Jewish and Gentile culture of the day this was often played out in the relationship of masters to servants.

By contrast, the church was the family of God. The Christians viewed each other as brothers and sisters. The gospel was the great equalizer. James acted immediately to put a stop to establishing or condoning a false social strata in the church. When someone came to faith in Jesus Christ they were treated like family. All others were loved and valued as part of the mission field.

The small book of Philemon is especially insightful as to how this became applicable to the early church. Philemon was a Christian who was also an influential master. His slave Onesimus was

most likely oppressed and fled to Paul to seek some form of refuge. Somewhere in the process Onesimus not only became a Christian, but he also became a valuable caregiver to Paul. In the book, Paul very skillfully writes to Philemon and encourages to take Onesimus back and then explains that they are now brothers in Christ and God was going to hold Philemon accountable for his treatment of Onesimus.

This gives us a glimpse into how profound this equality principle was to the early church. It was initially attacked and demonized by both Jewish and Roman culture that mutually despised and exploited the poor and unfortunate. Eventually, it won the day and ended slavery in the Roman Empire.

This equality principle emerges with every revival and awakening. It is absolutely profound and powerful. It not only distinguishes Christianity from every other world religion, it is also part of the fuel for radical culture change in any society where Christianity gains a significant foothold. The bottom line is that Christians have a mandate to treat all people equally with respect, dignity, love, value, and kindness.

The Rich and Poor Puzzle: James 2:5-7

“5) Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? 6) But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? 7) Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?”

Rich or poor is not a measure of good or bad. This is especially true because the book of Proverbs teaches there are good wealthy people and there are wicked wealthy people. There are also noble poor people and there are lazy poor people.

The goal is to do and be your best and trust God for your harvest in life. Our job is to apply the biblical principles of diligence, integrity, good financial stewardship, and generosity. God's job is to bless the fruit of our labor.

The rich that James was referring to were those who loved money more than anything else in life. Those were the ones who walked in the sandals of Judas who sold out Jesus for thirty pieces of silver and constantly siphoned funds from the ministry money bag. They would sue a friend for profit and betray even family for a few extra denarii.

Proverbs 1:10-19 warns about them. They steal, ambush, exploit, and rob to get money. They do not care who they hurt or how many lives are ruined as long as their money bag swells. They have no remorse about selling alcohol to minors, drugs to the addicts, or destroying young boys and girls, widows, or slaves in the prostitution industry. They have no values and play by no rules.

To these wealth seekers, the accumulation of money is more important than family, friends, loyalty, honor, and life itself. They will misrepresent goods and services, sell with unjust weights and balances, rent out uninhabitable homes and apartments, and become loan sharks to the poor and disadvantaged. The rich James was talking about were scam artists of the worst kind. They would not pay their workers or keep their contracts.

Yet many of them would put on a mask and play the social status game. They would seek positions of influence in the community and even leadership in the church. They lived double lives. Neither Jesus nor James wanted anything to do with them. It was to these that Jesus said, “go, sell all that you have and give to the poor and come and follow me.” (Mark 10:21)

You cannot serve two masters. You cannot serve God and money. God’s people are in trouble when the disciples of money take over leadership in the church. They do not share God’s vision, seek His will, or know His heart. They will derail the church and water down the gospel.

Better the poor who walk in integrity than the rich who got there by fraud. More trustworthy are the poor who are rich in faith than the rich who are poor in character. Worse yet are the poor who are lazy, live off others, and let everything they touch fall apart or deteriorate because they waste their money on alcohol or at the casino.

Best to find a Joseph, Esther, or Daniel who were blessed because they lived in the fear and favor of the Lord and walked in His ways. They were rich in faith, character, self discipline, and godliness. God entrusted much to them because they saw themselves as stewards and servants.

The Royal Law: James 2:8-9

“8) If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing well. 9) But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.”

As I spend more time in the book of James, I am reminded that James was the half-brother of Jesus and grew up in the same home with him. The influence that Jesus had on James comes through in his writings. I can only imagine the business ethic that Jesus employed when He took over the family carpenter shop. I am confident that love, fairness, and kindness were stamped on every business transaction and His workmanship displayed quality and excellence. I am sure it didn’t matter if His customers were rich or poor, Jew, Greek or Roman; I am confident they were all treated equally.

The above two verses almost sound like Jesus as He answered the question of the lawyer in Luke 10:25-29. He used this dialogue to go on and tell the story of the Good Samaritan. James took the teaching of Jesus and the royal law very seriously. He believed in treating all people with respect, kindness, dignity, love, and fairness.

James viewed partiality and favoritism as sin. In the story of the Good Samaritan every character had a reason for the way they treated the victimized traveler, but only the Samaritan lived out the royal law. James believed every Christian needs to live by the Golden Rule. For him, this was a vital kingdom principle.

Measured by Your Character: James 2:10-12

“10) For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all. 11) For He who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not commit murder.” Now if you do not commit adultery, but do commit murder, you have become a transgressor of the law. 12) So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty.”

The Law has a strange characteristic. You cannot pick and choose which part you will obey. You either keep it all or you break it all. You can not keep 8 or 9 of the Ten Commandments and congratulate yourself on your good character. Why? Because the one you broke made you a transgressor of the Law. It exposed bad character.

Suppose you are in a car that is close to falling over a cliff. You cannot make the slightest move in the front seat without it tipping toward disaster. Suddenly a rescue team yells and assures you that they managed to fasten a chain to the rear bumper of your car. You relax until they say, “It looks like a really strong chain, but it has one link that is nearly broken.” How many links of the chain need to be broken for the whole chain to be broken? The answer is “one.” Hence we have the idiom, “A chain is only as strong as the weakest link.”

I like the oath that is read to a witness ready to testify in court; “Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God!” Why is that important? Because, it only takes one lie to be a liar. Character is important. But honestly, I never understood how that oath would do anything to persuade an atheist to tell the truth.

But why does James make such an extreme contrast between adultery and murder? Both are severe. Both are mentioned in the Ten Commandments. Well, let me ask a question: “Would your marriage be secure if your spouse had no problem with lustful thoughts but was bent toward greed and violence?” My suggestion would be, “Don’t celebrate romantic plans to go on a dangerous vacation together if the next envelope you open has a new multi-million dollar life insurance policy to sign.” I would be very suspicious.

The bottom line is that you are going to be judged and measured by the full spectrum of your character. James is making a valid point. We are not saved by keeping the Law, but knowing Jesus and being filled with the fruit of the Holy Spirit produces personal growth in the full spectrum of the Ten Commandments.

Being a Christian does not give you an excuse to be a lying, cheating, stealing, carousing person bent toward greed and violence. If that is your character, James would conclude that it contradicts your claim of being a Christian. For the Christian, James is saying that the Ten

Commandments are no longer stone tablets that condemn us. Rather, they are transformed into polished mirrors to groom us into the love and character of Christ. They become the perfect Law of Liberty.

The Golden Rule: James 2:13

“13) For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.”

Jesus said it best; “1) Do not judge so that you will not be judged. 2) For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you.” (Matthew 7:1-2) If you want to receive mercy, show mercy. If you want to receive kindness, be kind. If you want the benefit of the doubt, cut other people some slack. If you want to live in fear, be suspicious of others. If you want to live with criticism, be a critic of others. It works both ways.

The Golden Rule says; “Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you. This is the essence of all that is taught in the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 7:12 NLT) Jesus taught these principles during the very first message He preached. It is true. It is profound. It is powerful.

Another way of saying it is that you reap what you sow in life. (See Galatians 6:7) Notice that you start the process. You do the sowing. Don’t expect to reap good if you sow bad. The harvest produces fruit after the seed you sow. If you want a different life, start sowing different seeds. If you want your life circumstances to change, you must first change.

I do not take this principle lightly. It is more than just a suggestion Jesus, Paul, and James shared in passing. They were serious.

Be alert and start watching people. Positive people reap positive outcomes in life. Negative people reap negative returns in life. Friendly people generally have many friends. Grumpy people live very lonely lives. Generous people are often happy people. Stingy people are often miserable and fearful. The golden rule is more valuable than gold. It is priceless.

Empty Vessels of Dead Faith: James 2:14-17

“14) What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? 15) If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, 16) and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,” and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? 17) Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.”

This starts the portion of the book of James that some see as being in conflict with the writings of Paul. They do not see James upholding the Doctrine of Justification by faith. James seems to indicate that works are involved in salvation.

I personally do not see a conflict between the two New Testament Theologians. In Ephesians 2:10, Paul says that we are the workmanship of Christ designed to perform good works. He clearly points out in the previous two verses that we are saved by grace through faith. James was basically saying the same thing. He emphasized that the way you know someone is saved is by looking at the fruit of their life. True salvation always shows up in a changed life. Paul actually talks about “good deeds” more than James. (Example: Titus 3:3, 8,14)

Here is the point James was making; if you say you have faith but have no validating works, your claim is void. Why? Because saving faith is changing faith. Salvation is dynamic and not passive. The indwelling Holy Spirit pours out the love of God (Romans 5:1-6), fills the believer with the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-24), empowers the believer (Acts 1:8), sanctifies the believer (Titus 3:4-7), leads, guides, protects, and directs the believer (John 14-16), and transforms the believer (2 Corinthians 5:17). This is merely a very basic survey of the inner ministry of the Holy Spirit within a true believer. These are things that separate the born-again from the religious. The difference is profound.

James then talks about faith in action. It is not enough to discover a physical need and then casually say you will pray for someone or bless them. If you learn about a brother or sister who is without clothing and in need of daily food, it's time to take action. The religious elite in Jerusalem were masters at saying the right stuff, but doing nothing. Instead of helping the poor and needy, they actually exploited them. They were empty vessels of dead faith.

The Invisible Edge: James 2:17-18

“17) Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. 18) But someone may well say, “You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.””

Faith is intended to produce works. It does not exist in a void. It is the fuel for action and significant happenings. It is the invisible edge. It is the intangible difference that makes a huge difference between two otherwise equal people or undertakings. But faith without works is dead by itself.

James nailed it when he said, “faith is best demonstrated by the works it produces.” Why? Because true faith accomplishes things. It gets results. It moves mountains and fills in valleys. It feeds the hungry. It builds churches, hospitals, and schools. Faith strengthens the weak, heals the sick, and reaches the lost. Faith is the winning edge, the doing edge, and the finishing edge.

Faith has hands to work and feet to move. Love can see the needs and hear the hurts, but faith does something about it. Faith moves to action. Faith is what turns ordinary people into extraordinary people. Don't claim to have faith and then do nothing.

Faith is believing that God can and will do what He promises. Faith steps out expecting God to step in. Sometimes faith is the only reason to do something when all else looks hopeless and impossible. Why? Because biblical faith is anchored in the person and work of God. Faith is not measured by how big we are, it is measured by how big God is. This is why I call faith the invisible edge.

False Claims of Salvation: James 1:19-20

“19) You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. 20) But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?”

James says that faith without works is useless. He then pulls out a very big hammer to drive his point home. He makes the very valid observation that Satan is not an atheist. He believes that God is one, and he shudders.

I believe the wording of “God is one” is a reference to the trinity. But that belief in the true identity of God does not make him a Christian. Why? Because it is not saving faith. It is not transforming faith. His belief has not produced conversion. God is still his arch enemy. Satan is still in rebellion. He wants to overthrow God and take the place of God.

James is unpacking a very important issue. Just because someone says, “I believe in God”, does not make them a Christian. This is a huge problem today. It is being born-again through saving faith in Jesus Christ that brings salvation. Conversion through the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit is always accompanied by confession and repentance. It sparks a dynamic process within that becomes life transforming. The end result is becoming a Spirit-filled disciple or follower of Jesus Christ.

Many people believe in the existence of God. Muslims believe in God, but they reject Jesus Christ as Lord and Messiah. Hindus believe in many gods, and Jesus is just one of them. The Russian Orthodox Church believes in Jesus Christ, but they reduce Him to religious rituals, ceremonies, and church traditions. They have no concept of a born-again experience.

So, let's assume you are living in the first century and religion and belief in the spiritual realm is everywhere and yet severe persecution of Christians abound. How are you going to discern who is a genuine Christian and who is out bounty hunting? Are you going to trust your life to someone who says, “I believe in God!” There were very few atheists in the first century. Everyone had some form of religion. Or are you going to do what James did and look for evidence of conversion?

These two verses bring the whole context into focus. James is not saying that works are the basis of salvation, rather he is saying that true conversion shows up in a person's life in very tangible ways. He agreed with the Apostle Paul, "Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things passed away; behold new things have come." (2 Corinthians 5:17) When new things failed to show up in a person's life, James assumed they were still part of the mission field and didn't waste time trying to give them false assurance of salvation. He gave them the gospel.

Becoming a Friend of God: James 2:21-23

"21) Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? 22) You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; 23) and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the friend of God."

Both Paul and James use Abraham as an example of justification. In Romans 4, Paul looks at Abraham believing God about the promise of an heir against all reason. Both Abraham and Sarah had become old and beyond years, and yet in hope against hope Abraham believed. There were no works involved in this venture of faith. Abraham was powerless to cause Sarah to conceive. God was 100% active.

In James 2, we have a different aspect of faith. This time it is a number of years later when Isaac was most likely a teenager and God called Abraham to offer him up as a sacrifice. This time it all rested on Abraham's shoulders. Abraham had to be active and step out and obey. In this case his obedience demonstrated the sincerity of his faith and love for God.

Faith and obedience always go hand-in-hand. Jesus did absolutely everything to pay for our sins and provide for our salvation. All we do is believe. (John 3:16) But when it comes to living the Christian life, we are called to obedience. Those whom God saves, He fills with His Spirit and they become His hands and feet in the world. Faith brings salvation, but works validate our faith as being real and sincere.

But to me, the amazing thing in this text is not the justification, it is friendship with God. Abram moved from being a lying scoundrel to becoming the friend of God. That speaks volumes about the relationship God wants to have with people. According to 1 John 1:1-7, God wants to have this same kind of fellowship with you and me. But notice verses 6-7, the way you and I live drastically affects our fellowship with God.

So do you want to become a friend of God? Jesus Christ made it possible. You are born into God's family by saving faith. Once in the family, it is up to you to spend time with God and build that relationship. Don't be a stranger with God when you can focus on building a deep relationship with Him and becoming close friends.

The Amazing Testimony of Rahab: James 2:25-26

“25) In the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? 26) For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.”

I enjoy listening to testimonies as to how God changes people. James did as well. That's why he picked the story of Rahab the harlot to illustrate justification. (Joshua 2:1-21 and 6:22-25)

A good testimony has three parts. First, it briefly describes what a person was like before God started working in their life. Second, it tells the story as to how they came to faith in Christ. And third, it points to the tangible changes God makes in their life. James looked at the third part as the validation of the claim to salvation.

As the testimony of Rahab opens, Israel was about to go in and conquer the Promised Land. One of the first challenges that awaited them was the fortified city of Jericho. Joshua sent two spies ahead of Israel to spy out the city. Sure enough, they entered the city and found refuge in the house of a harlot named Rahab. The reputation of her old life was very dark and sinful. Soon the mission of the spies was exposed and the city authorities started searching for them.

It is noteworthy that James refers to the men as “messengers” and not merely spies. (See also Joshua 6:17) I wonder if they started their mission in Jericho with a warning of judgement much like Jonah did years later in Nineveh? This may well be how their presence became known to the people of Jericho. It may also explain why Rahab offered them a place of refuge in her home. God was stirring in her heart.

As Rahab takes them to the roof of her house to hide them from the authorities, she tells them the amazing story of her new found faith in the God of Israel. Furthermore, she looks to them for salvation on behalf of both herself and her family from the coming judgement. (See Joshua 2:8-14) After a few hours, she let them down through her window on the outer wall so they could escape and return to Joshua.

Weeks later, when the battle took place against the city, sure enough, Rahab had gathered her entire family and tied the scarlet cord in her window as agreed upon with the spies. The scarlet cord was there in plain view for the entire week that Israel marched around Jericho. I like a good public confession of faith. As a result, Rahab and her entire family were the only ones from Jericho who were saved from the destruction. (Joshua 6:22-24)

But her story does not end there. Did her faith in God make a difference in her life? Did she become a new person? Does the Bible give a record of a changed life? That's the most exciting part of her story. Her full story actually gives me goosebumps.

According to Matthew 1:5, Rahab was so changed as a result of her faith in God that she ended up marrying a Hebrew man named Salmon. They gave birth to a son by the name of Boaz. He

was a righteous man of unquestioned character, dignity, and integrity. His mother undoubtedly had a profound influence on him. This is the same Boaz who became the star actor in the book of Ruth. He in turn married Ruth and they bore a son named Obed who in turn became the grandfather of King David.

I am very moved by the testimony of Rahab. She was so transformed by her faith in God that she ended up being in the lineage of the Messiah and a direct ancestor of James himself. What an amazing picture of grace, forgiveness, salvation, and a new life. She illustrates the principle that James was teaching. The proof of genuine salvation is more than just a statement of faith, it is in the testimony of a changed life.

The High Standard for Preachers and Teachers: James 3:1-2

“1) Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment. 2) For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well.”

Biblical teachers are held to a higher standard, not only for conduct, but especially for content. The standard for conduct is holiness. The standard for content is truth. A teacher's personal morality has a way of tainting their theology.

It takes diligence to be a good Bible teacher. It means years of study, prayer, and devotion to being a mouthpiece for God. A good teacher does not communicate their own thoughts, opinions, or bias; they accurately elaborate what the Bible teaches.

They need to have a basic understanding of hermeneutics. That is a fancy word that means “the science of biblical interpretation.” Though a good teacher does not need to be a scholar, they need to honor things like the intended meaning to the original audience, loyalty to the word, meaning in the language the text was written, some understanding of the historical context of a passage, ensuring that their interpretation fits the context of the passage, and that they are pulling the meaning from the text and not superimposing their own thoughts on the text.

Understanding the principle of biblical unity and harmony is also important. The Bible supports its own meaning over and over again. What is taught in one passage is reinforced in others. A skillful teacher knows how to illustrate scripture with other scriptures or Bible stories. You guessed it, a good preacher or teacher needs to become a diligent student of the Bible.

It takes time and effort to develop a sound Biblical, doctrinal, and theological foundation. Christianity has a rich history of 2,000 years of skilled and accomplished scholars and theologians. There is room for differences in the minors but the majors are non-negotiable. Many heresies have started over the centuries and bizarre religious cults have formed that claim some anchor in the Bible but which have practiced some very damnable extremes that are not biblical.

James was actually writing to counter one of these movements called “antinomianism.” They taught that Christians no longer had any moral boundaries around their life as defined by the Old Testament Law. They saw themselves as free in Christ to live and do whatever they pleased with no consequence. As you can imagine, fallen human nature exploited that line of reason to justify all kinds of sinful living.

Another burden facing a good teacher is developing the art of effective communications. Knowing how to package and present a message in orderly form with accurate illustrations, examples, and stories is important. Some worthless teachers set the Bible aside completely and resort to all emotional stories and illustrations to move and exploit their people. When you see this happening, run as fast and far as you can. Stories and examples should supplement and not replace the Bible.

There is so much more that could be included in this brief expose’, but let me say that the way the message is delivered is also important. I believe every biblical message needs to be anointed by the Holy Spirit. Paul spoke to this in 1 Corinthians 2:1-5. This calls for a life of prayer and communion with God.

Let’s review. Effective preaching and teaching should be biblically accurate, truthful, loyal to the text, packaged well, and anointed by the Holy Spirit. Preaching is a calling and teaching is a spiritual gift. James makes it clear that preachers and teachers are held to a higher standard and will incur a stricter judgement. Paul went to great lengths to emphasize this to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:14-4:8. I take this admonition very seriously in my personal life.

The Power of the Tongue: James 3:2-6

“2) For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. 3) Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. 4) Behold the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. 5) So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! 6) And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell.”

The tongue is a small part of your body, but it is very powerful. It will direct the course of your whole life. James compared the tongue to three things of his day.

First, James compared the tongue to the small bit put into the mouth of a horse. With that one small invention mankind was able to harness the power of the horse. In fact, the bit made it possible to harness the power of teams of horses. He who controlled the bit controlled the horse. Up to around one hundred years ago, the horse was the power behind much of the work accomplished in human history. The horse enabled mankind to conquer the land.

Second, James compared the tongue to the small rudder on the back of a ship. With that one small invention mankind was able to conquer transportation on both the waters of the world and in the air. Even modern aviation is based on the principle of a rudder. On both water and in the air, he who controls the rudder is called the pilot.

Finally, James compared the tongue to the power of fire. Fire can be used for multiple things from warmth, cooking, cleansing, forging, welding, and in some cases even propulsion. Its value is limitless, but its uncontrolled burning can be devastating as was the case of the historic Chicago fire. Harnessing and controlling fire has been the key to human survival for centuries.

Do you understand the power of words? It has been said that the pen is mightier than the sword. Your tongue has the power of life and it has the power of death. It can build up and it can destroy. It can heal and it can wound. If you harness your tongue then the power of words, language and communication are at your disposal. Within your mouth is the potential to influence people for great good or for great evil.

Winston Churchill was a British salesman who harnessed the power of his tongue to become Prime Minister of the United Kingdom at a crucial time in human history. It can be argued that his tongue was the single greatest voice to save England and western civilization during WWII.

Meanwhile, another tongue was speaking. The tongue of Adolf Hitler launched the world into WWII and was responsible for untold human misery, suffering, and death. What a contrast of two tongues!

Now we can grasp the value of words and begin to comprehend the power of the tongue. James rightly understood that the way we think and speak is more powerful than controlling the combined power of the horse, using a rudder to harness water and air for navigation and controlling the energy of fire.

Learn this principle well: Taking control of the way you think and speak is by far the greatest power and potential given to humanity. If you want to do well in life make sure your thoughts are based on truth and your speech is salted with love and grace! (Ephesians 4:29) Everything in your outer life circumstances will eventually expose the way you think and speak. If you cannot control your tongue your life will be out of control as well.

Are your key relationships falling apart? Change the way you think and speak about others! Are you failing academically? Change the way you think and speak about your gifts and abilities. Is your career stalled or are you stuck in a rut? Change the way you think and speak about your boss, job, or work colleagues! Are you broke and see yourself as a loser? Change the way you think and speak about yourself and your potential in life! Knowing and thinking the truth will set you free. The way you speak will direct the course of your life for good or for bad.

The Power of Words: James 3:6-8

“6) And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. 7) For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. 8) But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison.”

James now compares the human tongue and words to a raging forest fire. It defiles the body, sets on fire the course of our life and is set on fire by hell. Words are the outlet of human depravity and the arrows of the human will. Once words are released, they are like an arrow in flight and cannot be recalled.

Jesus talked about this in Matthew 15:15-20. He explained that it's not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but that which comes out. Listen carefully; “18) But the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. 19) For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders. 20) These are the things which defile the man; but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile the man.” The tongue is the window to the human heart.

James then points out that the people have been able to tame wild beasts, birds, reptiles, and creatures of the sea, but to tame the damage of the human tongue is impossible. You cannot take back harsh words, vulgar speech, curses, or vile speech. Animals can cause minimal damage, but the human tongue can bring down wrath, pronounce judgement, and start wars. Never has an animal caused damage even close to the evil that can be unleashed by the human tongue.

James goes so far as to say that the human tongue is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. It is a flaming fire fanned by hell itself. We can draw no other conclusion than that words have an impact on the physical, spiritual, emotional, psychological, and social realm. They literally shape the forces of our life.

Words have the power to build up and the power to tear down. They have the power to heal and the power to hurt. Words can impart hope and courage or they can exasperate bringing despair and defeat. I have seen harsh and critical words cut and destroy people. The damage can last years and leave ugly scars on the human psyche.

Why? Because words define identity, assign motive, shape personal value, and program the compass of our life. The messages we think and rehearse in our minds literally causes the formation of new brain matter for good or for bad. The two phrases of self talk “I can” or “I cannot” will launch your achievement level in two opposite directions.

Keep in mind, in the beginning God used words to create. There is a reason John 1:1 says; “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” I am so

thankful that God's Word is ultimately supreme. Can you imagine the mess humanity would create?

The power of speech and words cannot be overstated. Words are the basis of human thought and action. James is emphasizing that the power of words is incalculable. Words shape our view of reality and fuel the course of our lives. If you want to change your life direction the best place to start is by changing your words.

The Inner Fountain: James 3:9-12

“9) With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; 10) from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. 11) Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? 12) Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh.”

James had a major problem with verbal hypocrisy. He could not understand how someone could use the same mouth to bless God and then turn and curse people. A good heart cannot produce vulgar language, but a bad heart can use the whole spectrum of human vocabulary. Why? Because the tongue is the window to the human heart. The mouth speaks out of what truly fills the heart. (Matthew 15:18-20)

James could not understand blessing and cursing coming from the mouth of a godly person. James understood that a vile person can clean up their vocabulary and speak good on occasion, but a good person cannot spew out filthy and vile words any more than a good fountain can randomly spit out bitter water.

He also recognized that both vines and trees can produce only one kind of fruit. If you are gathering figs it is a fig tree. So also vines produce grapes and not olives. If your mouth is accustomed to spilling forth vile, cursing, and filthy conversation it is because you are wicked and lost and are merely putting on a religious veneer when it is needed.

Stop fooling yourself. You know you have heart trouble. God also knows the true condition of your heart. Humble yourself and cry out to God. The only way to clean up your mouth is for Jesus Christ to change your heart.

I do not judge people by the way they talk. I merely use it as an indication of where I need to start with them. I recognize if their mouth is dirty their heart is dirty. It is a good indication they need to hear the gospel. Jesus was comfortable around people that needed a change of heart. Being a carpenter rather than a priest was a great starting point for Him with people. They were real around Him.

I relish meeting and hanging out with people before they discover I am a pastor or world missions leader. It gives me a chance to get to know who they really are and where they are at

in life. As soon as they discover I'm a pastor, the masks go on and the games start as if being good around me will earn them some merit with God.

That's one benefit I have now that I can say I've been a politician. People did not put on false masks around me. In fact, many people curse and spew out even more bitterness. It's a great way to get to the heart of the matter and sample the true water coming from the inner fountain. My role in life is to point people to Jesus Christ as the fountain of living water. He is the only One who can change the human heart.

Courageous Self-Evaluation: James 3:13-18

"13) Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. 14) But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. 15) This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. 16) For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. 17) But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. 18) And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace."

James is sharing a very vivid contrast between two kinds of behavior. There is the redemptive behavior of God that marks the life of a true believer, and there is the corrupt and sinful behavior of the world that brands the ungodly. There are the seeds of the new life and there are seeds of the natural life. These seeds have very different DNA and produce plants that bear radically different fruit. The wisdom of God is unmistakable compared to the wisdom of the world.

James was not impressed with an intellectual doctrinal statement, he wanted to see living proof of salvation in a person's life. He made it clear that if a person had bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in their heart it invalidated any claim of salvation. James was very blunt to say that these qualities were not from God but were the fingerprints of the earthly, natural, and demonic. He said in no uncertain terms that where jealousy and selfish ambition exists, there is disorder and every evil thing.

Without exception, the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. This is the behavior that shows up where God is working. The seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. The Holy Spirit produces very distinct fruit in the life of believers. (See Galatians 5:22-24)

And yet James was not saying to measure others by these things, he was telling each person to examine their own heart. That's why verse 14 starts with those piercing words, "But if you have..." He wanted every person to be honest and courageous enough to examine their own heart. Here is the blunt truth: If these things are in you, then you are suffering from heart disease and spiritual cancer no matter what your confession of faith sounds like.

Let's be honest, the devil laughs every time he sees a so-called Christian couple getting a divorce or a church embroiled with internal conflict and coming close to a split. Stop fooling yourself –such things are not the work of God! Stop indulging your own flesh, this is not the fruit of the Spirit. Stop the self-deception, it is time for a truth encounter. It's time to repent and cry out to God!

That is exactly what James says in the next ten verses. He is about to get very passionate and animated in calling every person to repentance. James tells the early church that it is time to resist the devil and draw near to God. We need modern preachers with this kind of courage and boldness. Revival will never come while God's people are content with spiritual adultery and are secretly skinny-dipping in self-righteous hypocrisy.

If you think those are strong words, wait until you read the next ten verses. James is about to make the hellfire and brimstone preachers of the Great Awakenings look like Boy Scouts. This is the kind of preaching that marked the early church. No wonder their faith was able to withstand the Roman Coliseums! James was preparing the early church for persecution and martyrdom that is incomprehensible to much of the modern church.

The Relational War: James 4:1-3

“1) What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? 2) You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. 3) You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.”

Within each of us is an inner void that yearns to be filled. We will do almost anything to scratch that itch. Yet sin and selfishness has an appetite that can never be filled. People will lie, cheat, steal, exploit, and even kill to satisfy that inner lust, but it never goes away. It defies satisfaction.

James points out that behind every quarrel and conflict is a selfish desire. Our inner war can be traced to our own sinful lusts and pleasures, but it soon becomes an outer war with the people around us. Until we die to self we will forever have tension in our relationships with people.

Some lusts are so obviously wrong we are ashamed to pray for them, but we still envy and crave for them in our heart. Other times we ask and do not receive because our motives are wrong. It is not our intention to glorify God or help others, we are slaves to our own passions and desires.

As long as self is on the throne, you will lack inner peace and contentment and live with constant friction and conflict with those around you. The problem is not with everyone else. The problem is within *you*. Until you change, your circumstances will not change.

Happiness is not connected to self-indulgence. You can spend everything on your pleasures and still starve for satisfaction and fulfillment. Sin has an appetite that cannot be satisfied. Only Jesus Christ can stop the inner war and fill the void in the human heart.

Spiritual Adultery: James 4:4

“4) You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”

James now accuses some of the Christians of committing spiritual adultery. This was a charge often leveled against the Jewish people in the Old Testament. The book of Hosea was written to deal with this sinful condition. Though they were God’s people by covenant, the Jewish nation turned from Him like prostitutes to have an affair with the world. Though time and again God tried bringing them back to Himself, He eventually judged them severely and sold them into bondage. Only then did they return to seek Him.

Make not mistake, James was assuming the language of the Old Testament prophets. He calls these people “adulteresses.” He warned them that friendship with the world amounts to hostility toward God. He then goes so far as to say that whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. These are serious charges.

This language brings to mind the words of the book of Lamentations. In chapter two Jeremiah warned that God’s anger was stirred so bad against the sinfulness of Israel that He turned to become like an enemy against them. (See Lamentations 2:4-5) He was actively fighting against His own people because of their sin.

The New Testament is not silent about God’s wrath and discipline against His own people. Though few modern preachers dare touch the subject, many New Testament writers warned about God’s discipline and wrath. Jesus talked about it in texts like Mathew 5:29-30. Paul warned about God’s wrath in Romans 2:1-16. Texts like 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 causes me to tremble at the personal consequence of sin for the Christian. Paul goes so far in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8 as to say that God will become an “avenger” against the sexually immoral. Hebrews 10:31 warns that “It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God”, and chapter twelve strongly warns the New Testament believers about God’s discipline. Peter was also vocal about this subject in his Epistles on several occasions as was the Apostle John. Take a moment and review the letters to the seven churches in Revelation chapters 2-3.

What is my point? The New Testament does not soft-peddle the personal consequences of sin for the Christian. God can and does discipline and judge His own people for their sin and disobedience. It may be argued that because we have the complete Bible readily available to us and the indwelling Holy Spirit, we have no excuse for our sin and willful compromise with the world. Read carefully; James goes on to beg the backsliding Christian to repent and get right with God. (See James 4:7-10)

I personally believe that the utter failure of modern Christianity can be traced to a denial that personal sin has any consequence with God. We read the New Testament with blinders on our eyes every time we come to texts that talk about God's discipline. Preaching the terrible consequences of sin and warning Christians about God's wrath and judgment are silent themes from the modern pulpit. Yet this kind of preaching sparked the Great Awakenings.

But you may well argue that this kind of preaching would minimize God's love. Not at all. The book of Hebrews proclaims that those whom God loves He disciplines even as a son in whom He delights. (Read Hebrews 12:4-13)

Let me conclude by emphasizing that friendship with the world is hostility toward God. It is possible to be a Christian and be at enmity with God. You can be living outside of God's blessing and very much inside of God's discipline. He will actively oppose your ways and strive against you if you continue in your sinful, disobedient, and prideful ways. It is His loving way to get your attention and draw you back into His favor, grace and fellowship. According to the New Testament, this enmity will last as long as you refuse to humble yourself and repent of your sinful ways. (See James 4:1-10, Hebrews 12)

Revival Quest: James 4:5-10

"5) Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: " He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us"? 6) But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble." 7) Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. 8) Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9) Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. 10) Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you."

I am a revivalist. Much of my ministry has been devoted to calling God's people back to Him in revival which results in a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit and a renewed walk with God. I believe texts like the one above. I believe God jealously desires the Spirit He has made to dwell in us. I believe people can walk away from God and grieve His Spirit. I believe God disciplines those He loves. I also believe God has a plan to bring His people back to Himself, forgive them, break every bondage, and set them free.

I also believe in spiritual warfare and that Satan actively works against Christians to trip them up, lead them into bondage, and make them miserable. His goal is to tempt them, deceive them, enslave them, and entangle them in sin so as to render their walk with God non-effectual. (See Colossians 2:8; 2 Corinthians 11:3; 1 John 2:5-2:3)

I do not see God as angry or vengeful. I see Him as a loving Father waiting with open arms to bring His prodigals home, but He wants full repentance and complete humility. He does not force them to obedience, but He willingly lets them come to the end of themselves and receive

the full consequence of their sinful ways. (See Luke 15:11-32) When they return to Him, He runs to meet them, embrace them, forgive them, and restore them.

An evangelist aims his or her message at the unsaved and preaches the gospel to them offering salvation to the lost. A revivalist aims his or her message at the backsliding and wayward Christian calling them back to God. James was writing and preaching with the heart of a revivalist. He was concerned that the church was falling away from God and losing its fervor, passion, calling, and fellowship with God.

James was serious about calling God's people to repent and turn back to Him. James was calling Christians to resist the devil and draw near to God. These verses are addressed to the church and not to the world. That is a good thing, because it means God has a plan to bring His people back to Himself. He wants us to walk in His Spirit with full blessings and anointing while living in His presence. He jealously desires the Spirit He has made to dwell in us.

Why is this important? Because vast segments of the modern church do not believe revival is a New Testament doctrine. They believe revival is an Old Testament theme to Israel as in 2 Chronicles 7:13-15, but the church is under grace and therefore always in God's favor and fellowship. But I would strongly argue that the book James totally destroys that foolish theory. In fact, so does the entire New Testament.

A number of years ago, I was scheduled to start a renewal series at a church in Minnesota. In preparation the pastor started preaching through Old Testament passages on revival. Soon he was met with harsh opposition from a segment of his church that rejected the whole notion of revival. When he called me, he was very discouraged and ready to scrap the whole series. I silently prayed and then said, "Hey, I have this coming Sunday open, how about if I come and preach a message on the New Testament Basis for Revival?" He said, "Brother you're on the schedule." Then he hung up the phone.

As soon as he hung up, I realized that all of my revival messages were based on Old Testament passages. For the next week, I prayed with my Bible open and asked God to open my eyes to His plan for the church. By the time Sunday arrived I was overflowing with new insights on revival.

That morning I preached a 27 point message on the New Testament Basis of Revival. I did a very brief walk through of the entire New Testament and anchored one point in each book. The Holy Spirit used that message to break up the fallow ground and turn the skeptics into sincere God-seekers. A very somber prayer movement was born that morning.

The actual renewal series started nearly a month later and was accompanied by a precious outpouring of the Holy Spirit that extended much longer and spilled into numerous other churches. It started a groundswell that eventually cultivated in a county-wide evangelistic crusade with many churches involved. Many people came back to Christ, marriages were

restored, families were united, conflicts were resolved, bondages were broken, people were set free, and many lost people came to Christ for the first time.

Nearly 35 years of our ministry have been devoted to church renewals, evangelistic events and world missions. At one point, I wrote a book called “Revival Quest” that lays out the biblical case for revival in both the Old and New Testament. It is now out of print, but it made the case to many critics that God has a plan to call His church to revival.

The thrust of this text in the book of James is revival. I believe God is calling His church to revival in these times. Revival in the church often precedes awakening in the world. Maybe God is calling you back to Himself today through this post. My encouragement to you is to read James 4:1-10 several times and take appropriate action. Turn your heart back to God. Draw near to Him. Humble yourself and pray and seek His face. He will run to meet you.

Genuine Conversion: James 4:9-10

“9) Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. 10) Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.”

The early puritans used to talk about “unrepentant confessors.” They were referring to people who openly confessed sin but who had no remorse or sense of contrition. They had a religious experience but they did not experience conversion. James seemed to be saying a similar thing.

I agree with that position. It is possible for a person to go through the motions of confession but not have a genuine conversion experience. This is the point at which raising a hand during a gospel invitation or repeating the sinner's prayer may be a false pretense of salvation. The Bible does not talk about these outward steps being the basis of salvation.

The Bible talks about the inward condition of the human heart being one of genuine confession, repentance and crying out to God. James goes so far as to talk about sincere weeping and mourning over our lost and sinful condition.

I certainly have no problem with a gospel invitation or inviting people to trust in Jesus Christ as the basis of salvation, but I count true salvation by the fruit of a new life. If the human heart doesn't change, I have every right to doubt the claim of genuine conversion.

I firmly believe it is our job to share the gospel, but it is the Holy Spirit's job to bring about the conversion. He is the One Who convicts and wrestles with the lost sinner resulting in true conversion. I cannot save anyone, only God can.

Over the years I have watched many genuine conversions happen before my eyes. There is no question that a new birth happened and a new direction in life followed. They have what the Bible calls “Zoe life” or “spirit life.”

I have also seen many people jump through religious hoops that the church says results in salvation with absolutely no evidence of conversion or new life. This can include anything from a catechism, a confirmation, raising a hand, repeating a sinner's prayer, or going through the motions of being baptized.

I am fully content to let the Spirit of God wrestle with people until they are converted. When the conversion takes place it will be obvious to all. New life will emerge. The fruit of the Spirit will begin to show up. The person's life will begin to change. They will have a new hunger for God and for His Word. The Spirit of God will bear witness with their spirit that they are a child of God. (Romans 8:12-17)

It is possible for a person to be religious but lost. I do not waste time trying to give people a false assurance of salvation when the Spirit of God may very well be trying to convict them of being lost and in need of salvation. They need to settle that with God and not with me.

Building Bridges and Not Walls: James 4:11-12

“11) Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it. 12) There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?”

James had a knack at telling people to mind their own business. He pointed people to God and left them in His presence to deal with the big questions of life and eternity.

“There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and destroy.” What a profound picture of God. James understood that his job was to love and encourage people while pointing them to God. He spoke truth and let God wrestle with the human heart.

We do a terrible job of being the Holy Spirit. We don't know the hurts, pains, or struggles of others. We don't know their thoughts, emotions, or feelings. I firmly believe it is our job to build up and not tear down. It is our job to be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger. (James 1:19) It is our job to love God and serve people.

When we are real, sincere, and truthful with people the most amazing conversations will come. The Good Samaritan was effective because of his genuine compassion for people. (Luke 10:30-37) He Serves as an example of a world changer. He knew how to build bridges and not walls with people.

Inviting God to be Your Tour Guide Through Life: James 4:13-16

“13) Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.” 14) Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.

15) Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that." 16) But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil."

Though God honors planning, diligence, labor, savings, and wise investing; we do not control our own destiny in life. There is a danger to becoming proud and arrogant and living as if God does not exist. The bottom line is that man does not control his own destiny. Faith understands that God is, and He rewards those who seek Him. (Hebrews 11:6)

I love the wisdom offered in the book of Proverbs. It says, "5) Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. 6) In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight. (Proverbs 3:5-6) Solomon goes on a few verses later and says, "9) Honor the Lord from your wealth, and from the first of all your produce. 10) So your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine."

I believe we are to yield to God, seek His will and favor in our lives and be flexible to serve Him and others each day. James is warning about being self-centered and hedonistic. There is nothing more wonderful and fulfilling than living with a clear conscience, enjoying fellowship with God, walking in the Spirit, consciously yielding to God's will and seeking to be a channel of blessings to others.

I have a small motto in life. It says; "Do your best and let the Lord do the rest." God wants us to work on personal growth and development. He wants us to sharpen our people skills and strive for excellence. He wants us to apply ourselves and be diligent. He wants us to stretch, grow, learn, develop good careers, and even start businesses. He also wants to show up in our lives, direct our paths, pour out His blessings and help us enjoy the roses. He wants to be part of our journey through life.

It took me a long time to realize that God is committed to my joy, happiness, and success in life. These things are not measured by the absence of trials or suffering, rather they are the overflow of walking with God and being a servant to people. He wants us to enjoy our journey through life and He wants to share it with us. He wants to be our tour guide.

Sins of Omission: James 4:17

"Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin."

When I first heard the phrase "sins of omission" I had no clue what it meant. Then someone pointed me to James 4:17. It is the idea of knowing the right thing to do and yet not doing it.

Now keep in mind, I had honorary membership in the Professional Procrastinators Club. I always wanted to attend a meeting, but kept putting it off. It wasn't all my fault because the invitations usually arrived the week after the event. Most of us can relate.

That would be funny, but I had growing piles of unfinished projects, was behind on maintenance, was behind on bills, had no savings, and neglected many small but important relational items with family and friends. I was slowly sinking.

I didn't want to admit it, but the real problem was that I was lazy and lacked personal discipline. I had a character fault. I didn't start to change until God convicted me of my many sins of omission.

That was the beginning of a long journey of learning time management, finishing projects, taking control of my spending habits, taking care of my health, learning self-discipline and serving others. God is still working on me, but I am making progress.

It was a life-changing day when I learned that sin was a two-sided coin. The word sin literally means "to miss the mark." On one side of the coin we can miss the mark by doing things we should not do. On the other side of the coin we can miss the mark by not doing things we should do. When those two are added together none of us have room to judge others. We all have plenty of growing to do.

Condemning Hedonism: James 5:1-6

"1) Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you. 2) Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. 3) Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure! 4) Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. 5) You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. 6) You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you."

James exposes three basic faults in these verses that often accompanies materialism and its big brother named, "Hedonism." First is the belief that God is irrelevant to life. It is the idea that people can design and control their own destiny. It is the tendency to live for pleasure with no thought of God or others. God wants us to plan and engage in business, but He wants us to trust in Him, seek His guidance, and honor Him with our increase.

Second, James exposed the false notion that things and wealth can bring true happiness. Jesus warned against hedonistic values in verses like Luke 12:15; "Then He said to them, 'Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.'" He also warned against storing up treasures on earth while neglecting eternal treasures. (See Matthew 6:19-21) Think about it, if wealth can bring happiness, why are so many Americans miserable, depressed, addicted to drugs, or miserable because of broken relationships?

Finally, James exposed the mistaken notion that things have more value than people. James hit this nail really hard in this text. He believed that anyone who used people to get things rather than things to minister to people has a broken value system. He condemned human exploitation in this text and exposed it as a root of evil in human civilization.

If these three things are the core of your values system, James said; “strike three, you're out!” God is the ultimate umpire and we will all one day stand before Him to give an account of our lives. James actually said in these verses that our stuff gained in neglecting and exploiting people will be called as a witness against us in the day of judgement. That catches my attention!

On the other hand, the Bible commends honesty, integrity, good business practices, the proper accumulation of wealth, treating people right, compassion, and godly stewardship. Let me share a brief contrast on three different core values. An entitlement mindset says; “What’s yours is mine and I’ll take it!” Materialism says; “What’s mine is mine and I’ll keep it!” But Christianity says; “What’s mine is yours and I’ll share it!”

Living in the Presence of God: James 5:7-9

“7) Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. 8) You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. 9) Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door.”

Have you ever become impatient with God in the midst of a storm in life and felt like giving up? You pray and try to walk faithfully but it appears that nothing is happening. Then you start comparing yourself to the others who live secular lifestyles and it looks like they are prospering and have none of the struggles that you endure.

The early church was living through the worst of times. While the Christians were being torn apart by lions in the coliseums of Rome, the ungodly were partying and cheering from the grandstands. Doubts were piling up and many were tempted to walk away from the faith.

It was in the face of this kind of persecution and opposition that James was writing to encourage believers who had lost everything for the sake of Jesus Christ. His message was “Be patient until the coming of the Lord.” He then said, “The judge is standing right at the door.”

James then looked at the illustration of the farmer. He noted that the harvest comes after much toil and waiting. Man can plant and cultivate, but God is the one who needs to send the rains. He pointed out that the harvest makes it all worthwhile.

The same is true with everything we sow in life. It takes time to produce fruit, but it will come to those who are faithful and consistent. Why? Because God is faithful.

I especially like verse 8. James cries out; “Be patient! Strengthen your hearts! The coming to the Lord is near!” He may have been referring to the second coming of Christ, or he may have been talking about God’s grace and help in time of need. Either way, James was saying the Lord is near.

Then he said, “Stop complaining and taking out your frustrations on one another.” The bottom line is that James was encouraging the believers to focus on God and not their circumstances or other people around them.

James had discovered the secret of abiding in the shelter of the Most High and abiding in the shadow of the Almighty at all times. (Psalms 91:1) His fellowship with God had progressed beyond external circumstances or worldly comforts. He had learned the secret of thriving in the Spirit at all times and through any circumstance. He was calling the persecuted church to the same. He was calling them to live in the presence of God.

Reviewing the Story of Job: James 5:10-11

“10) As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. We count those blessed who endured. 11) You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord’s dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful.”

James now comes back to the theme of this book. It is “patience through suffering.” Remember, he was writing to the twelve tribes who were dispersed because of persecution. (See James 1:1). He then told them to count it as joy because God was going to use the trials to accomplish great things within them. (See James 1:2-4)

In this text, James points to the Old Testament prophets and the story of Job as an example of God’s faithfulness. The story of Job is especially significant, because Job had no idea of the wrestling match between God and Satan that precipitated his struggle. Job wasn’t going through trials because he was bad or because God didn’t love him. He was enduring the battle because he was the best that God had.

Two things happened as a result of Job’s severe storm in life. First, Job’s relationship with God grew deeper. Job 42:5 says, “I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees Thee.” That is a profound confession. Job was saying that prior to this trial his relationship with God was based on accumulated theology. It was the sum total of what everyone had said about God. But through his storm he met God personally. His relationship with God was now based on personal experience. That is a huge leap forward.

Second, Job learned that God was good and He can and does bless those who seek Him. (See Hebrews 11:6) In the end Job was blessed with double everything. (See Job 42:10-17) He saw that God was working for him and not against Him. He discovered that God was in control and He can write amazing last chapters for our life.

Let's face the facts. We live in a fallen world. Trials are a normal part of life. Some are self-inflicted. Some have roots in the activity of the enemy of all humans. Some come because bad people can and do cause us harm. But God promises to cause all things to work together for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:26-30) God is paying attention to our struggle.

His end goal is not what we have in life, but who we become. He works through our outer circumstances to conform us to the likeness of Christ. He wants us to be like Jesus. He wants to crown us with His glory and shower us with His goodness no matter what storms might be raging around us.

Paul goes on to say that nothing can separate us from the Love of God in Christ. (Read Romans 8:31-39) God can take the worse this life can throw at us and turn it into blessings. He can use them to deepen our relationship with Him.

Jesus wants to meet us in the storms of life. Just like He walked on the water to meet His disciples in the midst of a difficult storm, so He wants to walk into our lives in deeper ways through our storms. (Matthew 14:22-33) Trials and suffering are an invitation to meet God in ways never dreamed possible.

He is there whether you see Him or not. He wants to meet you in your storm. He wants good to come through your struggles. Never waste a storm in life. Run to God and let Him write the last chapter.

Keeping Your Word: James 5:12

"But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no, so that you may not fall under judgment."

This verse looks like it is randomly inserted into the text. Nothing in the context leads up to this thought, nor does anything following this verse elaborate on making oaths. James is warning the believers not to give their word about things they have no power or intention to fulfill.

He borrowed this thought from the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5:33-37. Let me quote the full context. ""33) Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, 'You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord. ' 34) But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, 35) or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. 36) Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. 37) But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil."

I may be speculating on this point, but this may be a value Jesus instilled in James when He took over the family carpenter's shop. We don't know what happened to Joseph, but tradition

has it that as the oldest son, Jesus carried the responsibility of providing for his family in the absence of His step-father. This may be why Jesus waited until age 30 to enter His public ministry. I believe He ran the business with excellence as well as verbal and financial integrity. What a heritage to pass on to his step-brothers.

Words are important. We will be judged by what we say. We will be measured by the promises we make. Vows are binding. God holds us accountable to keep our vows. This is true for marriage vows, business contracts, bank notes, or commitments made to others.

Sadly, we now live in a time when a handshake or giving our word means nothing. We have made lawyers wealthy by drawing up detailed contracts and suing over breach of contracts. Most laws are made because people are not trustworthy.

I believe James was also warning against co-signing for others. I know some good people who spent years paying off unsecured loans they foolishly cosigned for someone who had good intentions but no follow-through.

I have trusted a few people over the years to buy a vehicle from me with a down payment and a promise they would pay off the rest. I signed the title in good faith based on their word. I soon discovered their word wasn't worth anything. I wrote it off under my personal education fund.

I am coming to the place of even being cautious about giving a character reference. I once went to great lengths to help a man secure a job, and within a few weeks he had created a disaster. It turned out that his opinion of himself and his abilities did not match reality. My reputation took a beating in the process.

Can people trust what you say? Does your word mean anything? Are you keeping your marriage vows? Are you trustworthy? Do you represent the truth accurately? James seems to be saying that God will judge us by our words.

Insights on Health and Healing: James 5:13-16

“13) Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises. 14) Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; 15) and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. 16) Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.”

We now turn to the broad subject of prayer and healing. According to verse 13, God wants us to deepen our prayer and praise lives. He wants to be part of both our struggles and our successes.

James then turns to the subject of healing. I believe there is a Biblical doctrine on health and healing. It is very broad and balanced. We get in trouble when we hold to one or two points and neglect the rest. Let me briefly share my biblical perspective on this subject.

First, there are many causes of disease, sickness, and health problems. It is helpful to acknowledge the full list.

1. There are natural causes. This includes germs, bacteria, viruses, diseases, the natural aging process and physical accidents. The microbiological realm is real and you better learn about personal hygiene, sanitation, cleanliness, and common-sense safety.
2. There are lifestyle causes. Stress, negative thinking habits, bad nutrition, lack of exercise, poor sleeping habits, exposure to chemicals, pollution, addictions and high-risk sexual behavior can all contribute to poor health.
3. There are spiritual causes. The Bible connects some sickness to demonic origins (Luke 4:41), discipline for sinful living (1 Corinthians 11:29-30) and even God's sovereignty. (John 9:1-3)

Second, God wants us to take responsibility for our physical health. We should practice healthy eating, get regular exercise, get good rest, develop a positive philosophy for life, learn the power of forgiveness, use personal hygiene and avoid high-risk behaviors. God created the human body with amazing natural healing ability. We need to help and not hinder that process.

Third, the Bible has a place for medical doctors and good medicine. Luke was a doctor. Paul told Timothy to use some wine for his stomach problems. If you get cut or break an arm, go see a doctor. If your illness has a biological cause, get some medication, but recognize that medical care and pharmaceuticals are not the answer for every problem. (See Luke 5:26-26) Sometimes it's best to endure an illness and strengthen your natural immune system.

Fourth, God can and does heal people, but He is sovereign over healing. I believe it is always God's will to pray for healing, but it is not always God's will to heal.

1. God can be glorified and the Gospel can be advanced through healings. (Acts 3-4)
2. God can be glorified and we can grow through daily grace given to cope with physical afflictions. (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)
3. God wants us to confess our sins and live with a clear conscience. (James 5:14-15)
4. The redemptive work of Jesus on the cross made provision for our healing. (See 1 Peter 2:24, Isaiah 53:4-5)
5. There are some people with the gift of healing and our faith plays a crucial role in the healing process. (1 Corinthians 12:9, Mark 5:34)
6. Physical infirmities, aging and death are part of the natural cycle of life and should motivate us to seek God and eternity. (2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10)

Finally, good people can have very erroneous and even damaging views about health and healing. Here are a few examples.

1. It is always God's will to heal people.
2. If you are not healed it is because you don't have enough faith or you are living in sin.
3. Name and claim your healing... it is your right in Christ.
4. There is a demon behind every health issue.
5. God no longer heals or healing is not for today.
6. Modern medicine has an answer for all health problems.

It has taken years to develop my own approach to healthy living and healing. I consciously do my part and trust God to do His part. I know if I care for my body it will care for me a lot better. I believe if I'm sick enough to go to the doctor, I'm also sick enough to pray for healing. In the long run, I am more focused on my spiritual and mental health than my physical health. I praise God for my relatively good health and trust Him to help me run the race set before me that I might finish well for His glory. Heaven is my ultimate destination.

The Calling to Effective Prayer: James 15:16-18

"16) Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. 17) Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. 18) Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit."

A number of years ago while visiting extended family while on a vacation, I was invited to attend a morning Bible study and prayer meeting. I love prayer meetings and eagerly jumped at the opportunity. It just happened that the leader was studying the broader context of James 5:13-18 that morning.

Soon he started to minimize the significance of prayer for those who were sick or broken in some way. Then he quoted a notable Bible scholar by making a statement something like; "Prayer changes nothing but your attitude, and when your attitude changes that causes a chain reaction around you and other things begin to change."

I was shocked. Let me concede, I do agree that prayer affects the attitude of the person praying, but it does so much more. So I asked the leader if he actually agreed with the person he quoted that, "Prayer affects nothing but the attitude of the person praying?" He affirmed that he strongly agreed with the statement.

I then politely asked if I could raise one observation from the text. He welcomed the discussion. I pointed to verses 16-18 and noted that Elijah prayed that it might not rain and it did not rain. Then he prayed for rain and sky poured forth rain. I then asked; "How did a change in Elijah's attitude affect the weather?"

To the leader's credit, he quickly began to backpedal and admitted that he had never seriously looked at the illustration of Elijah in that way. God's Word backed him into a corner. He had to admit that a change in human attitude has no effect on weather patterns.

I share this story because it exposes the weak and pathetic view of prayer held by many Christians and in many churches today. Let's be honest, if prayer is nothing more than self-psychology then Christianity offers no more hope or power than atheism. In the above notion of prayer, God need not even exist. He is not needed.

The Bible presents a radically different picture of prayer than the one held by the scholar the Bible study leader quoted that morning. In the Bible, prayer is not about prayer; rather it is about connecting with the all-powerful God who is alive, active, powerful, providential, and can and does intervene in the world and in our daily lives.

We pray because God has power over things like weather patterns and much more. He is omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent and omnibenevolent. We pray because He knows, He is here, He has the power to do whatever He wants, and He cares.

Prayer is about fellowship and communion with God. It is about building a deep and personal relationship with Him. Elijah spent considerable time in God's presence. I believe that prayer is about hanging out with God and getting to know Him. Effective prayer is the extension of relational influence with the One who created, sustains, influences, and shapes the universe.

Prayer is not about man! Prayer is not about prayer! Prayer is not about psychology! Prayer is about God! Effective prayer is not man-centered; effective prayer is God-centered.

This text stresses that Elijah was a man with a nature just like ours and yet God answered his prayers. Keep in mind, Elijah lived before the time that Jesus walked among men. He lived before the death, burial, resurrection, and giving of the Holy Spirit to indwell every believer. I believe that our calling and prayer potential far exceeds that of Elijah.

Spend time pondering this text and what God is trying to tell you about prayer. He is calling you and me into a new adventure in life. He is calling us to learn the secret of effective prayer.

The Journey Home: James 5:19-20

"19) My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, 20) let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."

One of the greatest expressions of compassion is pulling alongside a brother or sister in Christ who is straying from God and seeking to win them back. It takes humility, sincerity, honesty, and

love. In the process, you often unpack a load of hurt, rejection, anger, and deception. Love them enough to endure the venom.

You cannot go in a judgmental or condemning way and have any hope of success. Sin is blinding to both the mind and the spirit. The person will often slip into self-justification mode and blame many others for their actions.

Timing is essential. The longer a person remains in a backslidden state the harder and more calloused they can become. Covering the encounter with prayer is also essential. The Holy Spirit is the one who softens the heart. This is often a spiritual battle.

Be prepared to be patient. God does not give up on people. Sometimes it takes coming to the end of self for a person to wake up and do some honest self-evaluation. Such was the case with the prodigal son. The Father waited and watched for a long time, but when his son was seen in a distance, the father broke into a run to go and meet him.

Also be prepared to uncover some genuine hurt, disappointment or misunderstanding that has been festering in the person. Satan exploits human hurt and disappointment to drive wedges between God's people. Be a good listener and be willing to ask forgiveness if needed.

There is much to learn from the way the Father celebrated when his straying son came home. He granted him a clean slate and a fresh start. Forgiveness goes two ways. In 2 Corinthians 2:6-11, Paul taught that forgiveness includes reaffirming love for someone seeking to come back to Christ. Make the journey home easy and not hard for people.

Over the years we have had a dual ministry of both revival and evangelism. Revival is aimed at the straying Christian. Evangelism is aimed at the unsaved. The harvest is plentiful and ripe in both fields. Be ready and willing to work on both fronts.

Conclusion to the Book of James:

"2) Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, 3) knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. 4) And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." (James 1:2-4)

My take away from the book of James is "Don't let anyone or anything steal your joy or wreck your love for Jesus." Don't let trials do it. Don't let temptations do it. Don't let the enemy do it. Don't let other people do it. And don't sabotage your own walk with God.

Joy is not the absence of trials or suffering, it is the presence of Jesus. No matter what is happening outwardly, we can be thriving in our relationship with Jesus inwardly.

We can experience peace when the world is at war. We can choose to love when others are filled with anger and hate. We can walk in God's blessing even when others around us are miserable. We can move ahead though others are moving backward.

The book of James removes all excuses. It makes the case that God is good and He is for us and not against us. He is committed to our growth and progress and can work through any trial or circumstance to bring growth and blessings.

Maybe you are discouraged and ready to give up. Maybe you have pulled anchor and are drifting away from God. The book of James points the way back home. Why not run back to Jesus?