**James Commentary**

**James Chapter 1**

Jam 1:2

**“brothers and sisters.”** The Greek text is “brothers,” but that often includes men and women.

[For more on brothers and sisters, see Word Study: “Adelphos.” For more on women’s involvement in the early church, see Appendix 11: “The Role of Women in the Church.”]

Jam 1:3

**“the testing of your trust produces endurance.”** cf. Romans 5:3-4.

Jam 1:4

**“full.”** The Greek word for “full” is *teleios* (#5046 τέλειος), which means “perfect, mature,” and it is used figuratively here, the phrase then meaning to have “full-effect” or “successful results.” It is used in combination with the word *echō* (#2192 ἔχω) meaning “to have,” and also *ergon* (“work”) thus the phrase carries the idiomatic meaning of “to have a complete effect.”

**“*fully* mature.”** The Greek word is *teleios* (#5046 τέλειος), which appears just previously in the verse translated as “full effect.” James uses a play on words here by doubling his use of *teleios* to explain how endurance is meant to function in the believer’s life. The wordplay can be expressed in something like “let endurance have its completeness so that you may be complete.”

Jam 1:5

**“generously.”** The Greek word is *haplōs* (#574 ἁπλῶς), and literally means, “simply, sincerely, openly.” It pertains to being open and above board, not hiding anything. Here it is used idiomatically for “generously,” and is the same basic idiom Jesus used in Matthew 6:22, when he said if your eye was “single,” then your whole body would be full of light. Idiomatically, the “single eye” is the generous eye. Christians are to give generously, liberally (see commentary on Matt. 6:22).

Jam 1:7

**“Indeed.”** This is the confirmatory *gar*, and has the force of “indeed,” or “yes.”

**“will receive anything from the Lord.”** This verse is usually taken to mean that the person who is doubting will not receive anything from the Lord because the Lord will not give him anything, and there are times when that is the case.

But also the Lord is gracious and merciful, and gives to us even when we do not deserve it, and so there is a second meaning buried in this verse: that a person who is doubting often does not receive what the Lord is giving because his own doubt keeps him from receiving it. Most Christians have experienced this at one time or another: we reject something that we do not trust is from the Lord. We may think it comes to us just by chance, or it is not good for us, or it is even from the Devil, but then we find out after the fact that it was from the Lord. Part of the mature Christian walk is blending trust with discernment so that we do not miss what the Lord is giving to us.

Jam 1:10

**“rich *brother*.*”*** James is not referring to rich unbelievers in the world, but wealthy believers. There is an ellipsis with the word “*brother*” (#80 ἀδελφός) that corresponds to its occurrence in James 1:9; “the brother in lowly circumstances.”

Jam 1:11

**“burning heat.”** The Greek is *kausōn* (#2742 καύσων), and means heat, burning (sun). This is not the scorching east wind, which is the usual meaning of *kausōn* in the Septuagint. The sun does not bring the wind from the desert.[[1]](#footnote-24515)

**“appearance.”** The Greek word is “face,” and the use of “face” is a Semitic idiom showing itself in the NT.

**“rich person.”** The Greek text is just the adjective “rich” being used as a substantive for “rich person.”

**“pursuits.”** From an old word for “journeys,” thus “pursuits” is appropriate here.[[2]](#footnote-31355)

Jam 1:12

**“endures *through* trials.”** Early in the Epistle of James (James 1:2-12), the emphasis is on trials, and life is full of trials. In James 1:13 there is a shift to “temptations.” Trials certainly have temptations, but trials and temptations are different. A trial is an outward experience while a “temptation” is an inner enticement. A trial may or may not also be a “temptation” to sin, based on the trial itself and the maturity of the believer experiencing the trial. Some trials also contain temptations for us, while other trials may be inconvenient but don’t “tempt” us to sin. Driving on a road and having a flat tire is a trial and an inconvenience, but while that trial is also a temptation to some people who will lose their joy, use obscenity, and express anger in various ways, mature believers will take it in stride as part of life in the fallen world and just fix the tire and move on with life.

We are to count it all joy (James 1:2) when we are in trials because we can use them to become more mature in our Christian walk. Life is full of trials, that is, external circumstances that take our time and energy and that we generally do not like. In fact, trials are unavoidable. But what is important is how we respond to those trials. We can be angry, unthankful, complain that life is unfair, and in general act in an ungodly fashion, or we can face the trial as a part of the fallen world, see it as just another part of life, and not let it steal our joy. We can graciously endure the trial.

In contrast to a “trial,” a “temptation” involves an inner enticement to sin, and in James 1:13 the text shifts from trials to temptations. Douglas Moo writes: “The Greek word for ‘test’ in v. 12, *peirazō*, is the same word that is translated ‘tempt’ in vv. 13-14. Using this term as a link-word, therefore, James makes the transition from testing to temptation. God, James has said, promises a blessing to those who endure trials. ...God may bring, or allow, trials; but He is not, James insists, the author of temptation (v. 13).[[3]](#footnote-20541) Ralph Martin writes that “testings (trials) are to be endured with fortitude,” while “temptations are to be resisted with a steadfast resolution.”[[4]](#footnote-24484)

**“stood the test.”** The phrase is literally translated “becoming approved” (*dokimos ginomai*). In the context of experiencing trials and temptations, this phrase refers to the process of overcoming temptations and proving one’s faith to be genuine through enduring the trials and temptations. In James 1:3, James states that the “testing” (*dokimion*) of one’s faith produces endurance, and when a believer has stood the tests of their faith, they will receive a “crown of life.”

**“the crown of life.”** The “crowns” are special rewards that will be given out in the future Messianic Kingdom, and the New Testament mentions five crowns that God will give to those people who deserve them. The crown of life is given to Christians who endure and stay faithful through trials and temptations. The Bible and history both teach that it is very difficult to remain faithful to a Christian commitment all through one’s life. Too frequently, people “on fire” for the Lord “cool off” and abandon their commitment.

Unfortunately, the cooling off is often a result of what they see around them in Christianity and the way they are treated by other Christians. It is no secret that many Christians are hypocrites, and this can be very discouraging to those who are sincere in their efforts to live for God. Since the beginning of Christianity some 2,000 years ago, it would not be an exaggeration to say that millions of Christians have backed off from their Christian commitment because of what they have seen in the Church and/or because they were treated badly by fellow Christians. Others have cooled off when faced with trials and temptations. Trials and temptations come in many forms but fall into two broad categories: pressure (persecution) or pleasure (the “pleasures of sin”—Heb. 11:25).

One reward for Christians who stay faithful throughout their lives is the “crown of life.”

[For a summary of all the crowns and more information on the incorruptible crown see commentary on 1 Cor. 9:25. For information on the crown of boasting see commentary on 1 Thess. 2:19. For information on the crown of righteousness see commentary on 2 Tim. 4:8. For information on the crown of glory see commentary on 1 Pet. 5:4. For more information on rewards and punishments in the future kingdom, see commentary on 2 Cor. 5:10.]

Jam 1:16

**“brothers and sisters.”** See Word Study: “Adelphos.”

Jam 1:17

**“giving…gift.”** The Greek word we translate “giving” is *dosis* (#1394 δόσις). The word *dosis* is a verbal noun, and can be translated as either “gift” or “giving.” Scholars, and hence English versions, differ as to whether the verse should be translated “every good gift and every perfect gift” (cf. ESV, KJV, NASB, NIV) or “All giving that is good, and every gift that is perfect” (cf. HCSB, NAB, NET, NRSV, Rotherham).

The two words in the verse that are sometimes both translated “gift” are different, *dosis* and *dōrēma*, which will be handled below. It was a typical Hebraic pattern, especially a poetic pattern, to say something two different ways for clarity (cf. Prov. 2:1-4, which repeat the basic concept in the first and last phases of the verse). For that reason, many scholars think that the two phrases are parallel and should both be translated “gift.” Other scholars think that the emphasis should be that both good giving, and perfect gifts, are from God. Although *dosis* and *dōrēma* could be used together purely for emphasis and both mean “gift,” the fact that *dosis* can refer to giving while *dōrēma* was a common word for a gift, a free gift, seems to place a difference between *dosis* and *dōrēma* that we should recognize in our English versions.

Anyone reading the Greek text immediately sees both meanings of *dosis* and realizes that it could be saying that both good giving and good gifts come from God above, as do “perfect gifts.” We assert that God chose the word *dosis* knowing full well that both its meanings were true and important for two reasons: making a difference between giving (*dosis*) and the perfect gift (*dōrēma*), and also as a repetition and thus a confirmation and emphasis that all good gifts were from God.

When a word or phrase can mean two different things, and both are true and can apply in the context, that can be the figure of speech amphibologia and we believe that is the case in this verse.[[5]](#footnote-18501) Given that both meanings are true but only one can be represented well in English, we felt that it was better to put the “giving” in the text so that it could be seen along with the “gift.”

By telling us that all giving that is good and every perfect gift from above comes down from the Father of Lights, this verse is making some very important points. One is that not all giving or all gifts are good. Much giving and many gifts can be harmful. The wise Christian knows how to give good gifts, and also when someone’s giving and the gift they give are not a blessing, but actually cause harm.

[See Word Study: “Amphibologia.”]

**“from above.”** This is a circumlocution for heaven, which itself is a metonymy for God who lives in heaven.

[See Word Study: “Metonymy.”]

**“Father of lights.”** Although this phrase can be seen as a simple appellation for “God,” it is very profound and should catch our attention. God is not the only light, although He is obviously the dominant and unchanging light. But it was always God’s desire to have a family, and His family has His nature. Thus even humans who are believers are “lights.”

**“shifting shadow.”** The Greek word translated “shifting” is *tropē* (#5157 τροπή, pronounced trop-'ā), and it occurs only here in the New Testament and is a word that generally refers to the turning of heavenly bodies, like the moon around the sun. The exact metaphor is uncertain, but since the context is God being the “Father of lights,” meaning the most prominent light and the source of all the other lights in heaven, it is likely that this is a reference to the way the heavenly bodies move and vary in the way they cast light and hence cause a shifting shadow. God is a stable, steady, light, and does not cause shifting shadows like other heavenly lights that vary due to the time of month, time of day, weather, etc. Of course, other lights of whom God is the Father include spiritual beings and us as the children of God. We are also light (cf. Matt. 5:14: “You are the light of the world”), but unlike God shine brighter some days than others.

The meaning of James 1:17 is clear even if exactly how to translate that idea from the text is somewhat challenging due to the grammar of the phrase—something that can be seen simply by checking a few different English Bibles, many of which differ as to exactly how to bring the phrase into English. The word “changing” (or “turning”) is in the genitive case, which, as we noted above, we assert is a genitive of cause. James Adamson thinks it is a genitive of description (genitive of apposition), which would make the verse read more like, “with whom there is no shadow, that is to say, changing.”[[6]](#footnote-18251) The meaning of the verse is that God, the Father of lights, does not change like other lights and therefore does not cast a shifting shadow.

Jam 1:18

**“gave birth.”***apokueō* (#616 ἀποκυέω) from the Greek prefix *apo*, “away from,” and *kueō*, “to be pregnant.” It means “to give birth to.” In this context, it refers to the New Birth that Christians get when they are “born again” and receive holy spirit. It is one of the three words used for the individual New Birth of a Christian that guarantees him everlasting life (see commentary on 1 Pet. 1:23).

**“a kind of firstfruits.”** There are many kinds of firstfruits. The firstborn child was the firstfruits of the family (Gen. 49:3; Deut. 21:17). There was also the firstfruits of the harvest (Exod. 23:19; Deut. 18:4), the firstfruits of the wine, oil, and honey (2 Chron. 31:5); and the firstfruits of the gift of holy spirit (Rom. 8:23). Epaenetus is called, “the firstfruits of Asia” (Rom. 16:5), because he was one of the first Christians to be saved in the Roman province of Asia. Similarly, the household of Stephanas is called “the firstfruits of Achaia,” which is today southern Greece. Jesus was the first person raised from the dead to everlasting life, and so is called, “the firstfruits from the dead” (1 Cor. 15:20, 23). In the New Testament, Christians are referred to as the firstfruits here and in 2 Thessalonians 2:13. Because there are many kinds of firstfruits, we are referred to as “a kind of firstfruits.” Here in James 1:18, the context is salvation via the New Birth (“he gave birth to us”), so the “firstfruits of his creation” refers to Christian salvation in its full extent, which will happen at the Rapture of the Church (see commentary on 2 Thessalonians 2:13)**.** In the Greek text, “firstfruit” is singular, but it is a uni-plural noun and reads easiest as “firstfruits” in English.

**“what he has created.”** The Greek can also mean “of his creatures,” which is less clear, because only humans will be resurrected and have everlasting life, and we do not generally consider the people in the different resurrections to be different “creatures.” However, as some scholars point out, the idea of “his creatures” has a greater emphasis on ownership; that these “creatures” belong to God.

Jam 1:19

**“Know *this*, my beloved brothers and sisters*.*”** Scholars have debated whether this opening phrase ends James 1:18 or starts James 1:19. The stronger evidence seems to be that it begins verse 19. The ambiguity is in part caused by the fact that the Greek word for “know” is in a form that can be either the indicative or imperative mood. Which mood a scholar believes it should be largely determines where it is placed in the text. But James tends to open his sections with imperatives, and that fits here as well.

[For more on the phrase “brothers and sisters,” see Word Study: “Adelphos.”]

Jam 1:20

**“human.”** The Greek word is *anēr*. The book of James uses both the Greek word *anēr* (#435 ἀνήρ), used generally for a male, a man, a husband; and also the word *anthrōpos* (#444 ἄνθρωπος), which is the generic term for “man,” mankind, and can include men and women. The word *anēr* occurs six times in James (James 1:8, 12, 20, 23; 2:2; 3:2). The word *anthrōpos* occurs seven times (James 1:7, 19; 2:20, 24; 3:8, 9; 5:17). Various explanations have been given as to why James goes back and forth between *anēr* and *anthrōpos*. In some verses, one clearly seems to fit better than the other. However, in general, *anthrōpos* always has generic implications of mankind, and implies aspects of the character, rights, duties, and limitations of human nature.[[7]](#footnote-13926) In contrast, the word *anēr* can refer to a male, but it also sometimes has a more generic implication but always with an individualizing influence, as if it read “each man” (each one) or to emphasize the individual, just as when we say, “That person is ‘someone,’” or “She is a ‘somebody.’” In those examples, the words “someone” or “somebody” mean someone important. This presents a problem for translators. Just as 2,000 years from now people unfamiliar with English might miss the meaning of our sentence, “She is really a somebody,” we can miss the meaning of *anēr* and think that it always excludes women. At the same time, it does often refer to males or male characteristics, as seems to be the case here. Thus, while many versions have something like, “For human anger does not produce the righteousness of God,” and that is certainly true, it likely misses the cultural overtone that in the Greco-Roman culture (and the Jewish culture too) a man becoming angry and using his voice and strength to accomplish something was both common and accepted, and this was considered to be a typically male, not female trait. Women were generally expected to be more subdued in how they acted.

Jam 1:21

**“wickedness (which is so prevalent​).”** The Greek for this phrase literally means, “abundance of wickedness” or “overflowing of wickedness.” However, it is clear that James is not saying that the Christian can be involved in a little wickedness but not an abundance or “overflowing” of it. Sophie Laws writes: “James’ meaning is clear although he uses his words imprecisely.” Also, “His fondness for cadence and alliteration has produced a difficulty in translation. The noun *perisseia* normally means an excess or surplus. James is hardly counseling merely the discarding of surplus malice!”[[8]](#footnote-31062) By using the word *perisseia* (#4050 περισσεία), James is saying, perhaps even by using hyperbole, that we have to get rid of wickedness, and there is an abundance of it! Every serious Christian realizes how much wickedness lives in them. It is a herculean task to rid ourselves of the evil that seems to come up from within our hearts. Every Christian must be constantly vigilant to rid ourselves of the abundance of wickedness that arises in our lives.

**“the word *that has been* planted in you.”** The word of God was planted in us by our teachers. The word was planted in us, but now we have to nurture it and make it grow into fruition in our lives. It is important to see that we are to receive the word with “meekness.” Meekness is coachability, the willingness to change when taught, coached, and corrected. Our natural minds are at opposition to the Word, and so it is imperative that we receive it with a mind that says, “Teach me and I will change.”

**“souls.”** The Greek word often translated “soul” is *psuchē* (#5590 ψυχή, pronounced psoo-'kay), and it has a large number of meanings, including the physical life of a person or animal; an individual person; or attitudes, emotions, feelings, and thoughts. Here it is used more broadly of the individual himself with an emphasis on his thoughts and emotions. Thus, while the verse could read something such as, “which can save you” (NIV; cf. HCSB), the inclusion of the word “soul” points us to the fact that the thoughts, feelings, and emotions are being considered as well.

There is a deep truth embedded in this verse. Although the primary meaning is certainly that the Word of God is able to “save us,” give us everlasting life, the word “save” is used of being rescued in this life also, and the word “soul” can refer to our mental and emotional state. Thus while the most dominant meaning in the verses is that the Word of God is able to save our lives from death; a secondary and embedded meaning is that it is also able to give wholeness to our mental and emotional life.

[For a more complete explanation of “soul,” see Appendix 16: “Usages of ‘Soul.’”]

Jam 1:23

**“person.”** The Greek is *anēr* (#435 ἀνήρ), which is often specifically used of a person of the male sex, but not so much in James. The analogy is to people who hear the Word of God and then forget it right away, and that tendency is as much in women as in men. For more on “man” and *anēr*, see commentary on James 1:20.

**“his natural face.”** This refers to the way the person really looks (BDAG). The Greek literally means “the face of his birth.”

Jam 1:25

**“looks carefully.”** The Greek word is *parakuptō* (#3879 παρακύπτω), and it means to stoop down or toward something in order to look at it, or to look at something with the head bowed forward or with the body bent over. It is also used metaphorically for looking at or into something carefully or intently. There is a metaphorical use of the verb in which it is used for a rapid or cursory glance, and some commentators have taken that to be the sense in Scripture. However, the only place that meaning may fit in Scripture is 1 Peter 1:12 (see commentary on John 20:5).

**“continues in it.”** The Greek word is *paramenō* (#3887 παραμένω) and it means “to remain in a place, or to stay in an occupation or state.”

**“acts.”** The Greek word is *ergon* (#2041 ἔργον) and it simply means “works.” The whole phrase is literally, “a hearer of forgetfulness but a doer of work.” But James has in mind not just any work, but specific “acts” that spring from looking into “the perfect law of liberty” and thereby “continuing it in.” These actions are acts that are commensurate with living a life of true faith and are ones that reflect and follow the “law of liberty.”

Jam 1:26

**“bridle.”** The Greek word is *chalinagōgeō* (#5468 χαλιναγωγέω) and it means “to bridle, hold in check, or guide” as like with a horse by putting a bit into its mouth to direct and restrain. *Chalinagōgeō* is also used in James 3:2 where James connects it with the equestrian imagery of guiding and directing a horse when riding.

Jam 1:27

**“care for.”** The Greek word is *episkeptomai* (#1980 ἐπισκέπτομαι) and it literally means “to look upon,” and thereby, “to visit.” But it can also mean “to exercise oversight on behalf of, or to go see a person with a helpful intent.” Thus, in conjunction with the need and distress of the orphans and widows that James refers to, *episkeptomai* is being used in the sense of “to care for” here.

**James Chapter 2**

Jam 2:1

**“brothers and sisters.”** See Word Study: “Adelphos.”

**“trust in our Lord Jesus Christ.”** See commentary on Romans 3:22 about the phrase “trust in Jesus Christ.”

**“favoritism.”** The Greek word is *prosōpolēpsia* (#4382 προσωποληψία), and it literally means “to lift the face (on a person),” in the sense of giving attention and being uniquely kind and thoughtful toward them. And thus, it means to show personal favoritism, as in giving more respect, honor, attention, or value to one person and not to another. In the biblical culture, the “face” often referred to the entirety of a person, and/or implied an intimate or a close personal relationship with the person. When Adam and Eve hid in the Garden of Eden, they hid from the “presence” (lit. “face”) of the Lord God (Gen. 3:8), and to “see God’s face” meant to have full access to Him and to enjoy His favor (cf. Ps. 17:15; 27:8).[[9]](#footnote-21958) Therefore, when someone “lifts their face on a person,” it means that they incline themselves toward that person and act favorably toward them with the implication that they do not share this same attitude and behavior toward others. James is writing to admonish against trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ and still holding onto worldly behaviors like being prejudiced and showing partiality to certain people over others. Furthermore, James’ prohibition is in the context of church meetings when people gather together as equal members of the Body of Christ. James’ message is that believers are to look upon and treat each other fairly and equally in the church, not like the way that the world would treat them.

Jam 2:2

**“into your synagogue.”** James is addressed “to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (James 1:1), and this shows that a good number of them were still meeting in synagogues and thus mixing with the Jews there. It makes sense that many of these early Jewish Christians could worship in the synagogue because many of them rejected Paul and were “still zealous for the law,” as James told Paul in Acts 21:20.

The doctrine of the Trinity was not yet an issue; the early Christians did not think Jesus was God, and since they were zealous for the law they kept the feasts and the ceremonial laws, and also would have still been circumcising their children.

The phrase “into your synagogue” can also be taken generally, and mean something like “into your meeting,” but that is unlikely by this time in history when synagogue buildings were common. Also, since James is writing to the Jewish Christians in the Dispersion, it is more likely that the Jewish Christians who were dispersed would find synagogues to meet in rather than try to start their own, because of the number of households and amount of money it took to build a synagogue.

**“man.”** See commentary on James 1:20.

Jam 2:3

**“Sit by my feet.”** The Greek phrase literally means “sit under my footstool.” This is a Hebraic expression that means “to sit beneath (by) the feet.” Sitting on the floor indicated non-preferential treatment and being near someone’s feet was a low position typically assigned to non-distinguished guests and household members.

Jam 2:5

**“brothers and sisters.”** See Word Study: “Adelphos.”

Jam 2:7

**“the good name.”** A good name was very valuable in the biblical world (cf. Prov. 22:1; Eccl. 7:1).

**“blaspheme.”** The Greek verb *blasphēmeō* (#987 βλασφημέω) means showing disrespect to a person or deity, and/or harming his, her, or its reputation.

[For more on *blasphēmeō*, see commentary on Matt. 9:3.]

Jam 2:8

**“neighbor.”** On who is our neighbor, see commentary on Luke 10:27.

Jam 2:10

**“stumbles in one *point*, he has become guilty of all *of it*.”** Occasionally someone will say this verse proves that all sin is equal in the eyes of God. That is clearly not the case. James is speaking in the context of people who would ignore or minimize their sin, and he points out that even one sin makes us as sinful as if we had broken the whole Law. While it is true that committing one sin makes us as sinful as if we had broken the whole Law, because sin is sin, that is not the same as saying that all sins are equally serious. It is clear from both Scripture and logic that some sins are more serious than others.

That not all sins are equal should be clear from the words of Jesus. Speaking to Pilate, he said, “The one [Judas] who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin” (John 19:11). Here the Lord explicitly said that Judas’ sin of handing Jesus over was a “greater sin” than Pilate’s. Further, that there is such a thing as an “unforgivable sin” ought to give us pause to consider that not *all* sins are equal (cf. Mark 3:28-29).

In the Law, the consequence of some sins was the death penalty, while the consequence for other sins was only a beating, and some sins were only punished by fines. The seriousness of the penalty reflected the seriousness of the crime, and it is obvious that God considered some sins more serious than others. This is also true in the New Testament. Everyone sinned, but some sins were so serious that people who committed them were put out of the church (1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20). Furthermore, Ephesians 5:5 notes sexual immorality and covetousness as sins that will keep a person from having an inheritance in the future Kingdom of God.

Also, Paul told us that if someone sinned against us in a small, or “trivial,” way, we should not go to court (1 Cor. 6:2 NIV, ESV, NET, RSV, NRSV, NJB, etc.). However, if someone sins against us in a way that was not trivial, the implication is that we can go to court, because the civil authorities are for our good, and carry out God’s wrath on evildoers (Rom. 13:4). We all know this from the common experiences of life. If we loan a fellow Christian $250 because we know them and trust them, but then they refuse to pay us back, we would not sue them. But if someone was a Christian but acted in a dangerous and criminal way by murdering, raping, stealing a car, or committing a crime that was not “trivial,” we would call the police or even sue to regain our property. Both Scripture and logic tell us that some sins are “trivial,” while some are serious. The consequences of trivial sins are minimal, while the consequences of serious sins are serious.

Jam 2:13

**“triumphs over.”** The Greek is *katakauchaomai* (#2620 κατακαυχάομαι), in the middle voice, as it is here, literally, to boast against, but it is also used of one thing triumphing over another, or being stronger than another. We deserve judgment, but God’s mercy is stronger.

Jam 2:14

**“brothers and sisters.”** See Word Study: “Adelphos.”

Jam 2:15

**“brother or sister.”** The Greek word *adelphos* (typically translated “brother”) is often not gender exclusive, in other words, it often refers to both genders.

[See Word Study: “Adelphos.”]

Jam 2:17

**“trust by itself, if it does not have works.”** We have to be careful here not to overestimate what James is saying. James could not be saying, “Clean up your act and stop sinning, and then you will be saved.” That would contradict Scripture and logic. Everyone sins, even after they trust God and accept Christ as Lord. However, trust, by its very nature, indicates some form of action, even if it is only mental action. The person who genuinely trusts God, at some level, attempts to follow what God says, even if an outside view of the person does not seem to show it.

Jam 2:19

**“There is one God.”** This reading, or the reading, “God is one,” are the two most likely readings from the manuscripts. The reading “God is one” “…agrees with the common Jewish orthodoxy of the time regarding the unity of God.”[[10]](#footnote-28671) There are a half dozen or so variations of this phrase, some of them obvious changes made by the Church to conform the verse to the beliefs of the day.

Jam 2:23

“**And Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”** A person can believe God and be considered righteous and still sin, even sin on purpose. Abraham shows us that. He was afraid he would be killed so he lied about his wife Sarah and handed her over to be another man’s wife years after God made this statement in Genesis 15:6 about him being righteous by his believing God (cf. Gen. 20:1-18).

Jam 2:24

**“You see that a person.”** James begins this section (James 2:14-26) with a rhetorical question, “What does it profit, my brothers, if someone says he has trust but does not have works? Is that trust able to save him?” (James 2:14). Previously, James had asserted that believers are to be not only hearers of the word, but doers of the word as well (James 1:22-25). In addition, “religion that is pure and undefiled” is caring for those in need, such as orphans and widows (James 1:27).

In connection with his description of “true religion,” James now considers how showing favoritism does not cohere with having trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. He sketches an incident where a person professes to trust in Jesus but then fails to live according to the law of love taught by Jesus. Such behavior is inconsistent and hypocritical. Favoritism is incompatible with genuine trust in Jesus (James 2:1) and fails to demonstrate adherence to the law of love (James 2:9). And thus, James’ admonition is to “speak and act as people who are going to be judged by the law of liberty” (James 2:12).

James’ rhetorical question at the beginning of James 2:14 is directed at a simple premise: how can trust be authentic if it is not revealed through a person’s actions? Furthermore, James goes one step further and draws out the conclusion of his premise: “Can trust that does not result in a change in behavior actually be a trust that saves a person?” This question gets to the heart of the matter that James is addressing: “What does genuine trust *look* like when it is demonstrated in the life of a believer?”

James asserts that if a person believes (i.e., trusts in Jesus) but does not have “works,” that person’s trust is dead. (James 2:17). In combination with James’ claim that “a person is declared righteous by works, and not by trust alone” (James 2:24), the reader might be confused about what James is talking about. How are “works” tied in to a saving trust in Jesus? Moreover, these statements by James likely bring up many questions in connection with the writings of the apostle Paul where Paul has made the exact opposite claim: “For we maintain it is by trust that a person is declared righteous, apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:28).

So, does this mean that James is contradicting Paul? The simple answer is “No, he’s not.” The presupposition that most readers bring with them when reading the letter of James is that when James uses words like “trust” and “works,” he is using them with the same connotation and meaning Paul does. But this is the error in logic that brings the tension between James and Paul in the first place: a logical error called “the fallacy of equivocation.” However, when the mistake of equivocating the usage of these words in Paul and James is clarified, it will help the reader to see how James is making an entirely different point than Paul and using the same terms but in a completely different context, and thus assigning them a different meaning.

Unlike Paul, James’ argument in this section is not about the *means* or *merit* of salvation. While Paul’s argument in passages like Romans chapter 3 and Galatians chapter 3 is preoccupied with delineating the *basis* for salvation, James’ focus is rather on what authentic trust in Jesus looks like in practical terms—that is, what does trust look like in a person’s life?

Both Paul and James use the word “trust” (Gk. *pistis*) to refer to “belief, confidence, or reliance upon something” but they use it in totally different contexts. Paul is differentiating between “trust” and “works” as the basis for salvation, whereas James’ intention is to express how “trust” and “works” are interconnected and cannot be divorced from each other. This comparison might seem confusing until it is understood that Paul’s use of the word “works” is always with a view to “works of the law,” whereas James’ use of the word “works” is not in reference to law-observing works, but to “works of trust,” i.e., works that issue from having trust in Jesus. This critical distinction between the contexts of Paul and James is the crux of the tension that is often presumed to be between the two writers.

With that clarification made, what is James actually saying about how a person is justified “by works…and not only by trust”? (James 2:24). First, James’ contrast in James 2:18 between a person who has “trust” and a person who has “works” is not a comparison between “trust” and “works” themselves, but instead between a person who has “trust” and yet does not live according to that trust, and a person who trusts and then lives according to that trust. In conjunction with James’ exhortation in James 1:22-25, the first description refers to those who hear the word and believe but never actually obey the word they hear. The second description refers to those who hear the word and then do the word by obeying. So, when James speaks about the one who has “works,” he is speaking about the person whose actions (i.e., their works) reveal that they truly believe and trust the word they have heard, and thus, they genuinely trust in Jesus as their Lord and Christ.

To prove his point, James makes the striking claim that even demons believe in God but never have works that show their trust in the truth they know (James 2:19). They understand the truth and “believe” that God is real and Jesus is the Christ, but their manner of conduct (i.e., lack of obedience to God) reveals that they do not have genuine trust. Instead, they simply are afraid of God because they know their judgment is inevitable. This exemplifies how “trust apart from works is barren” (James 2:20) because if a person’s trust is authentic, it will be accompanied by the type of actions that prove its genuineness. To put it succinctly, trust without transformation is fake trust. James’ point is that a person can mentally assent to a fact, but if no action is taken in light of their belief, it is not true trust—trust is proven to be real through the demonstration of one’s actions (i.e., works).

James takes the lives of Abraham and Rahab as illustrations of his argument. They both trusted in God, but James highlights how that trust was proven to be real by their actions (“works”). Abraham obeyed God’s commandment to bind his son Isaac and sacrifice him on Mount Moriah (Gen. 22:1-19), and Rahab believed in God and showed her allegiance and trust by hiding the Israelite messengers when they came to Jericho (Josh. 2:2-21). The “good works” shown by their obedience and submission to God’s authority proved their trust was genuine—they trusted and thus obeyed. And that is why when James says a person is declared righteous “by works” and “not only by trust,” he is claiming that if a person’s life does not demonstrate the obedient action that results from true trust, then it is not true trust. Mere “trust” (belief) like demons have does not make a person righteous in the sight of God. Only genuine trust, which is proven by actions, is a trust that saves and is the evidence that a person is a doer of the word, and not a hearer only.

Jam 2:26

**“spirit.”** The Greek word is *pneuma* (#4151 πνεῦμα). Here it refers to the natural life of the body. See commentary on Luke 23:46.

**James Chapter 3**

Jam 3:1

**“brothers and sisters.”** See Word Study: “Adelphos.”

**“we will receive a stricter judgment.”** Teachers will receive a stricter judgment than most other Christians because what they believe and teach not only influences them, but also influences the ones they lead and teach (this is actually true of any Christian leader; not just teachers although this verse only mentions teachers). If a person sins and leads others to sin, that is a greater sin—and has greater consequences—than if a person sins on his own and does not lead anyone else into sin.

We see that pattern in the Old Testament. For example, Leviticus 4 is about the sin offering people had to offer when they sinned unintentionally. If a priest sinned, which also brought guilt on the people, he had to bring a young unblemished bull as a sin offering (Lev. 4:3-4). The text assumes that if a priest sinned the people would be affected by the sin as well. If, on the other hand, a leader sinned, he was to bring a lesser offering, an unblemished male goat as an offering (Lev. 4:22-23). The sin of the leader was not automatically assumed to affect the people, although it might. Leviticus 4 also shows that the ceremony that accompanied the priest’s offering was more involved and elaborate than the ceremony that accompanied a leader’s offering. Leviticus 4 then goes on to say what happened if “one of the common people” sinned, which was that they brought an unblemished female goat or lamb as an offering (Lev. 4:27-28, 32).

The sin of a common person does not have as great a consequence in society as that of a leader, and the sin of a leader does not have as great a consequence as the sin of God’s anointed priest. That fact is reflected in the offerings the sinner was to bring and the ceremony that accompanied the offering.

There are many sins a person can commit, but the sin of false teaching is great indeed. Paul wrote that if a person taught a “Gospel” that was different from the one Paul proclaimed, “let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:8-9). The curse upon false teachers is one of the aspects of the stricter judgment upon teachers.

Teachers have a huge impact upon God’s people. Many Christians do not trust their own ability to read and interpret God’s Word, and rely on teachers to interpret it for them, and that is, at least to some extent, what teachers are called by God to do. God gives teachers a great responsibility, and Christ said, “Everyone to whom much was given, of that one much will be required” (Luke 12:48).

It is precisely because teachers do have the trust of many people that they are tempted to teach from impure motives, and this is pointed out many times in Scripture. There are false teachers among the flock (2 Pet. 2:1). Impure motives can include personal recognition, building a larger audience or congregation, having greater authority, acquiring money, and more. Thus, the Bible says that some preach Christ from envy and rivalry (Phil. 1:15), some out of selfish ambition (Phil. 1:17), and some for money (Titus 1:11). Some teach the doctrines of men as if they were the commandments of God (Mark 7:7), and some do not really understand what they are teaching, which is why teachers should spend a lot of time in the Word (1 Tim. 1:7).

Every teacher makes mistakes, and every teacher sins, so what can a teacher do to be righteous and holy in the sight of God and not fear the Day of Judgment? One thing is to check his or her motives. Most people are aware of their motives, and, for example, a teacher knows if he or she is avoiding a godly but difficult subject and instead is teaching a subject that he or she knows will get the audience excited and bring in money. There are other things as well, of course. Just knowing that God holds teachers to a higher standard and they will be judged more strictly should be sobering enough to any godly teacher that he or she will diligently seek the Lord about what to teach and how. The “easy way out” for any called teacher would seem to be not to teach at all, but the called teacher feels the call of God on his or her life and knows, like Paul, “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:16 NIV84). The godly and accurate teacher will receive great rewards, and so should push forward to fulfill the call of God and teach God’s people.

Jam 3:4

**“Look!”** The Greek word is *idou* (#2400 ἰδού), and it is used to get our attention. See commentary on Matthew 1:20.

**“the pilot.”** This is more literally, “the one steering.”

Jam 3:5

**“sets ablaze such a large forest.”** The analogy between the tongue and the forest fire is very apropos. On so many occasions someone says something “small” that could seemingly be easily ignored, but because it is not, and the issues are pressed, sometimes whole lives are changed for the worse.

Jam 3:6

**“appoints itself.”** The verb is *kathistēmi* (#2525 καθίστημι), and the form of the verb in the Greek text can be either middle voice or passive voice. Historically translations have favored the passive voice, “is set,” but the context and scope of Scripture show it should be the middle voice, thus “sets itself,” or “appoints itself.”[[11]](#footnote-12192) The same word in the same form is used in James 4:4 where the person “makes himself” an enemy of God. The tongue is personified here and is the embodiment of the sin nature in us in that it does not want to submit to God. It is set on fire by Gehenna, as if getting its inspiration from the Devil himself. The person who can bridle his tongue is indeed a fully mature person.

**“course of life.”** Vincent correctly observes that this is “a very obscure passage.”[[12]](#footnote-22905) Even exactly how to bring the Greek words into literal English is difficult, due to the multiple meanings of the words. Thus, *trochos* (#5164 τροχός), properly “wheel,” was also used of anything circular, including “course,” “pattern,” or “cycle.” The Greek word *genesis* (#1078 γένεσις), most literally “birth,” was also used of existence or human life. Thus the commentators vary greatly as to how to translate the phrase. For example, “wheel of birth” (Vincent), “wheel of existence” (Lenski), “course of nature” (YLT), “course of human existence” (NET).

Most commentators like “life” or “existence” better than “birth”[[13]](#footnote-30333) and believe the tongue defiles one’s course of life, which of course it does. However, in using the word *genesis*, the verse points to the effect of the tongue being multi-generational. The verse already says that the tongue “defiles the whole body.” Sadly, the tongue that is set on fire by Gehenna destroys not only the life of the man with the fiery tongue, but generations after him.

**“Gehenna.”** In this context, “Gehenna” is put by metonymy for the “evil” that is associated with it. The literal “Gehenna,” the Lake of Fire, cannot set a person’s tongue on fire.

[See Word Study: “Metonymy.”]

[For more on Gehenna, see commentary on Matt. 5:22. For information on annihilation in the Lake of Fire, see Appendix 4: “Annihilation in the Lake of Fire”.]

Jam 3:9

**“curse.”** Cursing others was very common in the biblical world. For more on curses, see commentary on Luke 6:28.

**“likeness of God.”** For more on the likeness of God, see commentary on Genesis 1:27.

Jam 3:10

**“brothers and sisters.”** See Word Study: “Adelphos.”

Jam 3:12

**“brothers and sisters.”** See Word Study: “Adelphos.”

Jam 3:14

**“selfish ambition.”** The Greek is *eritheia* (#2052 ἐριθεία). See commentary on Romans 2:8, “selfishly ambitious.”

**“truth.”** A person can “lie against the truth” because the truth is an objective standard. No one can “make his own truth,” truth is set by God and is a standard outside of ourselves. People can lie against it, but they cannot change it.

Jam 3:15

**“from above.”** A circumlocution for “from heaven,” which itself is a metonymy for God, because heaven is where God lives.

**“worldly-minded.”** [For more on *psuchikos* see commentary on 1 Cor. 2:14, “natural.”]

Jam 3:16

**“selfish ambition.”** The Greek is *eritheia* (#2052 ἐριθεία). See commentary on Romans 2:8, “selfishly ambitious.”

Jam 3:17

**“reasonable.”** See commentary on 1 Timothy 3:3.

Jam 3:18

**“the harvest of righteousness”** is a genitive of apposition: “the harvest, that is to say, righteousness.” What is harvested is “righteousness.” A harvest of godly conduct (“righteousness”) is then sown back into the ground in peace. The word “harvest” is literally “fruit” (#2590 *karpos*), but in this context, the “fruit” is what is produced, like “the fruit of one’s labor,” that is, the production based on the labor. So the “production” of righteousness is the harvest. People live in peace and godly wisdom (i.e., righteousness) and there is a harvest of righteousness, which is then resown into the world in a peaceful way by people who are cultivating peace. In the Greco-roman world, grain that was grown was often referred to as “fruit” as in the phrase, “the fruit of the soil,” and so that grain, that “fruit,” was “sown.” People who wish to truly cultivate peace in the world live righteous lives and then sow that righteousness back into the world, thus cultivating more widespread peace.

In the context, “righteousness” does not refer to a status or judicial standing before God. James is referring to behavior that is pleasing to God and according to the wisdom that He gives. “This righteousness cannot be produced in the context of human anger (James 1:20), but it can grow and flourish in the atmosphere of peace.”[[14]](#footnote-17359)

**“by those who cultivate peace.”** This seems to be the most natural reading, although the text can also be translated, “for those who cultivate peace.” While it is true that those who sow peace reap it, thus it is sown for them, it seems more the case that those who sow in peace are the ones trying to make peace. This is a case where the Greek can encompass both meanings in one word.

**James Chapter 4**

Jam 4:1

**“fighting.”** The Greek is *polemos* (#4171 πόλεμος) and it means a war, an armed conflict, a fight, a battle. It was used of a dispute, strife, or quarrel, but in a lesser sense. This is the figure of speech hyperbole, exaggeration. There were not armed conflicts between believers, but because God wants believers to live in peace, any sharp conflict is exaggerated.

**“quarreling.”** The Greek is *machē* (#3163 μάχη), and it is a battle, fight, or quarrel, but not as widespread as *polemos* (#4171 πόλεμος), “war.”

**“among you...in the parts of your *body*.”** There were conflicts and quarrels in the Church, among “you,” the congregation. The last phrase about the war “in the parts of your body” can refer to either or both an internal war of the soul or an external war in the Church, because “parts of your body” is used of both the physical parts of a human body and the individuals within a congregation. Peter speaks in similar language of the internal war of the soul (1 Pet. 2:11), and that may be what James means here, but it is likely best not to exclude that James refers to the internal and external war. Thus, James would be saying that conflict stemmed from the desires for pleasure that were internally at war in each person—in the parts of your body—as each person fought with their own desires, but then that internal war broke out among the “individuals” of the church who ended up at war with each other.

**“*desires for* pleasure.”** The Greek reads simply *hedonē* (#2237 ἡδονή) in the plural, or “pleasures.” This is the figure of speech metonymy, where “pleasures” is put for the desire for pleasures.[[15]](#footnote-28702)

[See Word Study: “Metonymy.”]

Jam 4:3

**“you ask with wrong motives.”** There are many different reasons that God does not answer prayers. One of them is that people often ask with the wrong motive. Another reason is if the person asking is evil, prideful, and unrepentant about their sin. God will not listen to the prayers of wicked and unrepentant people; those prayers are an abomination to Him (Prov. 21:27; 28:9).

[For more information about the sacrifices and prayers of wicked people being of no value, see commentary on Amos 5:22.]

Jam 4:4

**“Adulteresses!”** This exclamation is typical Jewish thinking. The people of God were married to God and were accused of adultery toward their husband, God, when they sinned against Him (cf. Jer. 3:6-8; 5:7; Ezek. 16:32; Hos. 1:2).

Jam 4:5

**“the Scripture says.”** This formulaic expression commonly introduces a direct quotation from the Old Testament. However, there is no verse with this specific statement in it. It was a common Jewish technique to present an idea compiled from multiple verses as if the Old Testament said it in a single verse.

**“spirit.”** Robertson and other commentators ask the question, “Does the ‘spirit’ in the verse refer to God’s spirit or man’s ‘spirit’ (i.e., his sin nature, attitudes, etc.)?”[[16]](#footnote-29972) There seems to be more evidence for the fact that this use of “spirit” refers to our attitudes and emotions. People, yearn enviously, and especially so in light of this context, which is about people living by their lust. “The evil spirit is the evil impulse…in us. …There is a spirit in us which longs to envy and thus inclines us to fight each other….”[[17]](#footnote-19962) If we understand that the “spirit” in us refers to our attitudes and emotions which have been corrupted by sin, then we can understand the very next phrase, “But he gives a greater grace.” We all need the greater grace of God to overcome the evil desires that emanate from our fleshly nature.[[18]](#footnote-30172)

Once we understand that the “spirit,” our emotions and attitudes that flow from our soul, especially because they are corrupted by sin nature, are envious, we can see why James 4:5-7 are a unit and fit together well. The Bible tells us that the heart is deceitful and exceedingly corrupt (Jer. 17:9), and we have to battle to live a godly life (Gal. 5:16-17). Our sin is why we need for God to give grace, “a greater grace” than our sin so we can be holy in His sight (James 5:6). But we have to help out, which is why God reminds us that He opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble, then says, “submit yourselves to God” (James 4:7). But that is not all. There is more to the inner battle than just “submit to God.” Our inner spirit is still inclined to follow the Devil and be rebellious and ungodly, so James goes on to say, “Resist the Devil, and he will flee from you.” In summary, we have a nature, a spirit, that is inclined to evil, such as envy, so we need God’s grace to cover our sin and we also have to both submit to God and resist the Devil.

**“caused to live in us.”** “Caused” is somewhat more literal than “made.” God caused us to have, or made us humans with, a “human spirit;” that is, our inner attitudes and disposition of mind. Sadly, that original making was changed when Adam sinned and as a result, our fallen human “spirit” lusts, envies, and sins. That is why we need God’s grace, as the next verse, James 4:6, says.

[For more on the usages of “spirit,” see Appendix 15: “Usages of ‘Spirit.’”]

Jam 4:6

“**greater grace.”** There is so much teaching on “free grace” and “God loves everyone,” that this verse is basically ignored by everyone. God does love everyone, and God does show grace to everyone, but that does not mean that God also does not have conditional love and conditional grace that He only gives to some people.

Any parent with lots of children knows that each child is loved. However, if one child is rebellious and another one is helpful and obedient, the parents will often do things and extend themselves a little more for the obedient child than they will for the rebellious child. That is the case with God. Everyone gets grace from God, but those who humble themselves before him get special grace, special help from God, that rebellious people just do not get. That is what this verse says, and the statement is repeated for emphasis in 1 Peter 5:5.

We see the principle of God giving special grace to those who are humble all through the Bible. People who dedicate themselves to God get blessings in ways that people who do not serve God never get. A good example is Daniel, who dedicated himself to God throughout his life. He was blessed with the visitation of an angel, who addressed him by saying, “O Daniel, man greatly loved,” (Dan. 10:11). The Bible even makes the point that Jesus himself was heard by God “because of his reverent submission” (see commentary on Heb. 5:7). If we want our prayers answered consistently, we must become reverently submissive to the will of God, like Jesus was.

Jam 4:7

**“Devil.”** The Greek word is *diabolos* (#1228 διάβολος), which literally means “Slanderer,” but *diabolos* is the base of our more familiar name, “Devil.” Slander is so central to who the Devil is and how he operates that one of his primary names is “the Slanderer.”

[For more information on the names of the Devil, see Appendix 8: “Names of the Devil.”]

Jam 4:11

**“brothers and sisters.”** The Greek word *adelphos* (typically translated “brother”) is often not gender exclusive, in other words, it often refers to both genders.

[See Word Study: “Adelphos.”]

**“judge the law.”** At its most basic level, judging the law is deciding which laws to obey and which can be ignored.

Jam 4:12

**“Lawgiver and Judge.”** These are serving as titles in this verse.

Jam 4:14

**“What is your life?”** The question likely being asked in the Greek text is more literally, “Of what sort is your life?” James is making the point that life is transitory and to a large degree out of our control. People really do not know what their life will be like when they speak of doing business, even though they have a hope of being successful. No one knows what the future will bring.

Jam 4:17

**“it is sin.”** The literal Greek is “for him it is sin.”

**James Chapter 5**

Jam 5:3

**“stored up treasure in the last days.”** This is irony. In the last days, when people should be concerned about how to maximize their rewards in the kingdom, these selfish rich people are storing up treasure here on earth.

Jam 5:4

**“Look!”** The Greek word is *idou* (#2400 ἰδού), and it is used to get our attention. See commentary on Matthew 1:20.

**“Lord of Armies.”** The Greek is *Sabaoth*; Σαβαώθ, and is a loanword transliterated from the Hebrew *sabaoth* which means “armies,” or “hosts.” It is used in the OT in the title for God, *Yahweh of Armies,* and then also appears in the NT as *Lord of Armies* (Romans 9:29; James 5:4). It is unfortunate that the phrase “Lord of hosts” has come into our modern versions, because the word “hosts” is not used now like it was 400 years ago in the days of the KJV. Today a “host” is usually assumed to be the person who is in charge of a party, or somehow involved in serving others at a party or social event. The Hebrew and Greek words mean “army,” and God is the “Lord of the army.” He commands the army of heaven, although some scholars believe that the phrase originated with him commanding the armies of Israel; but that does not seem to be correct, although, when Israel was obeying God, He certainly was the commander of its army.

Jam 5:6

**“oppose you.”** The context shows that “oppose” here is to successfully oppose. Any righteous person would oppose having his livelihood and even his life taken away, but in this case, they could not successfully oppose the wealthy, greedy landowners.

Jam 5:7

**“brothers and sisters.”** See Word Study: “Adelphos.”

**“Look!”** The Greek word is *idou* (#2400 ἰδού), and it is used to get our attention. See commentary on Matthew 1:20.

**“early…latter.”** Israel has a wet season and a dry season. It does not rain throughout the whole year in Israel like it does in many parts of the world. The wet season comes in the Fall, and it usually starts in mid to late October. That early rain is called the “former rain.” Sometimes these “former rains” are quite heavy. When the rains come in the late fall and the weather becomes much colder it can be uncomfortable to plow. That is why Proverbs 20:4 says the lazy man won’t plow because of the winter. It is not really “winter,” but it can be cold. The rainy season continues through the fall and winter with rain and colder weather, and even snow in some areas, until the Spring comes bringing the “latter rains,” a period of nice rain at the end of the rainy season (usually April).

In the rainless months from May to October, the sun, especially the summer sun, bakes the ground. So, by fall, after about six months of baking heat (May-October), the ground is hard and often cracked. The early rain (the “former rain”) softens the ground so farmers can “plow.” Psalm 65:10 says God softens the ground with showers, and that is exactly what happens. When the former rains do not come on time the ground stays hard and cracked, and the farmers cannot plow. Jeremiah 14:4 says: “Because the ground is cracked because there has been no rain on the land, the plowmen are ashamed, they cover their heads.” The kind of plowing done in the ancient Near East is different from the plowing and planting done today. Today, the plows dig trenches in the dirt and the seeds are planted in the trenches and then covered up. In contrast, in biblical times the farmer simply scratched up the top of the ground so that the dirt was loose and then he scattered the seed on top of the dirt, as we see in the Parable of the Sower (Matt. 13:3-9; Mark 4:3-9; Luke 8:5-8.

Most of the grain in Israel is planted during the fall, like our winter wheat, and grows only slowly over the much colder winter months, then it quickly grows and ripens in the early spring when the sun is stronger and the spring rains (called the “late” or “latter,” rains), come and bring the bountiful harvest. The “latter rains” (the “spring rains”) provide the abundant water that brings the crops to full maturity.

The former and latter rains were so essential to life in the Middle East that they are mentioned in many verses, and are attributed to the blessing of God (Deut. 11:14; Job 29:23; Jer. 3:3; Hos. 6:3; Joel 2:23; Zech. 10:1; cf. Jer. 14:4; Ps. 65:10).

It often happens that Christians get confused about which rains are the “former” rains and which are the “latter” rains. That confusion is usually due to not letting go of our Western calendar and not understanding that there are not two rainy seasons in Israel, but just one season with a beginning and end. According to our Western calendar, we think the “former” rains should come in the Spring and the “latter” rains in the Fall, but the biblical world did not use our calendar. There is only one rainy season; it starts with the “former” rains about late October, and ends with the “latter” rains in March and April.

[For more on plowing and sowing in the Bible, see commentary on Eccl. 11:1. For more on why birds were generally considered evil in biblical times, see commentary on Matt. 13:4.]

Jam 5:9

**“Brothers and sisters.”** See Word Study: “Adelphos.”

**“so that you will not be judged.”** The fact that being judged is the consequence shows us that “complain” in this context is not righteous complaining about injustices that is meant to get results and change the situation. Rather, it is referring to ungodly complaining that has no real purpose other than to express and spread discontent, which then leads to destruction. The intensity of this complaining is clearer in the Greek which says the complaining is “against” one another, which was clearer in English expressed as being “about” one another.

The phrase, “so that you will not be judged” also subtly ties what James is saying to his fellow believers of Jewish descent back to their history, and especially the Exodus, because when the Israelites came out of Egypt they complained about all sorts of things and in doing so brought the judgment of God down upon themselves. In this context, “judged” means to be condemned.

**“Look!”** The Greek word is *idou* (#2400 ἰδού), and it is used to get our attention. See commentary on Matthew 1:20.

**“is standing.”** The Greek text uses the perfect tense, “has stood.” The point is that the Judge has been standing at the gates; the time of judgment is near.

**“at the gates.”** The noun “gates,” *thura* (#2374 θύρα), is plural in the Greek text, and thus the reading “gates” is smoother in English than “doors.” It is not totally clear what “gates” the Judge is standing by, but it would not be the gate or door to one’s personal residence. Since “the Judge” is at the gates, this seems to be a reference to Judgment Day, with the Judge standing at the gates of the Kingdom or the New Jerusalem, ready to judge those who stand before him.

Jam 5:10

**“brothers and sisters.”** See Word Study: “Adelphos.”

Jam 5:11

**“Look!”** The Greek word is *idou* (#2400 ἰδού), and it is used to get our attention. See commentary on Matthew 1:20.

Jam 5:12

**“brothers and sisters.”** See Word Study: “Adelphos.”

**“fall under judgment.”** This means to be condemned when judged (cf. James 5:9).

**“‘Yes’ mean ‘yes’… ‘No’ mean ‘no’.”** See commentary on Matthew 5:37.

Jam 5:13

**“suffering hardship.”**[[19]](#footnote-18038)

Jam 5:15

**“And the prayer of trust will save the one who is sick.”** This verse has been a cause of confusion to many believers because there are huge numbers of sick people who get prayed for but do not get healed. However, this verse is not just about praying for the sick, it speaks of “the prayer of trust.” Therefore, the question we must ask and answer is, “What is the prayer of trust.” There are some important keys in this verse, the context, and the scope of Scripture that will help us understand what it is, and we will see that “the prayer of trust” refers to a prayer that a person prays by revelation while operating the “manifestation of trust.”

Before we begin our analysis of the phrase, “the prayer of trust,” it is important to realize that the use of “save” in James 5:15 refers to healing, not to eternal salvation. The Greek word is *sōzō* (#4982 σῴζω), which was a common Greek word with a wide semantic range. These meanings not only include “save” in the sense of one getting everlasting life, but “save” in the sense of “to rescue from danger or destruction” (cf. Matt. 14:30; 27:40), and “to save from sickness and disease,” thus to make well, make whole, or heal (cf. Matt. 9:21; Mark 5:23, 28; 6:56; 10:52). The ancient Greeks did not use *sōzō* to mean “save” in the Christian sense, but at some point in history the word *sōzō* became used for being rescued from God’s judgment and wrath (cf. Joel 2:32, Septuagint) and so it is used in the Bible, particularly the New Testament, in the special sense of giving someone everlasting life.

When Christians today hear the word “save,” most of them think it only means “have everlasting life,” but that is in large part because most modern English Bibles only translate *sōzō* as “save” when the context is about having everlasting life. Those versions translate *sōzō* as “heal,” “rescue,” “restore,” etc., in other contexts. That is the case here in James 5:15, where, to avoid confusion, many modern versions translate *sōzō* using words that refer to healing (cf. “heal” CJB, NLT; “cure” GW; “restore” NASB; “make the sick person well” NIV). If English translations translated *sōzō* as “save” every time it appeared in the New Testament, it would be much easier for the English reader to see the wide range of meanings *sōzō* has.

Here in James 5:15, the Greek word for “prayer” is *euchē*, (#2171 εὐχή, pronounced eu-'kay) and it has two primary definitions, “prayer” and “vow.” In the other two places *euchē* occurs in the New Testament, it means vow (Acts 18:18; 21:23), but here in James *euchē* refers to a prayer. *Euchē* was commonly used in Greek literature for prayer or petitions to the gods.

Also, it is very important that we understand why the REV translation has, “the prayer of trust,” when almost every other version says “the prayer of faith.” The Greek word we translate “trust” is *pistis*, (#4102 πίστις). *Pistis* was a commonly used Greek word, and it means “trust,” “confidence” or “assurance.” When the Greek New Testament was translated into Latin, *pistis* was translated as the Latin *fides* (pronounced fee-dace). The English word “faith” comes from the Latin *fides*. Sadly, through the years the definition of the English word “faith” changed from its simple biblical meaning of “trust” to what it is today: “firm belief in something for which there is no proof.”[[20]](#footnote-32692) Thus, when religious people have no proof for what they believe, we often hear them say, “You just have to take it by faith.” It is vital to understand that “belief in something for which there is no proof” is an unbiblical definition that developed over the years because the Church told people to believe in things for which there was no proof, such as the wine becoming the blood of Christ in a communion service.

Jesus never asked anyone to believe he was the Messiah without proof. He fulfilled the Messianic prophecies, healed the sick, raised the dead, and did miracles, and he asked people to believe the miracles that he did (John 10:38). Similarly, God does not ask us to believe Him without proof. He has left many evidences that He exists and that His Word is true. Thus when God asks us to have trust (“faith”), He is not asking us to believe something without proof. God proves Himself to us, and that is why we trust Him. Since “trust” is the biblical definition of *pistis*, the REV translates *pistis* as “trust.”

Another reason the REV uses “trust” instead of “faith” is that in our modern times in some religious circles the word “faith” has come to refer to a power that people have within themselves to accomplish things, but biblically such power does not exist. God is the Power, and has the power, and we accomplish things with His power, not ours. We trust God, who then supplies the power to make things happen.

[For more on trust and faith, see Appendix 2: “‘Faith’ is ‘Trust.’”]

The reason James 5:15 is so confusing is that although it says “the prayer of trust will save the one who is sick,” through the years many very committed Christians who believe in divine healing and genuinely have great trust in the Lord have prayed for people to be healed but not gotten results—some individuals remained sick while others even got worse. This situation is made even more confusing because some of the people who were prayed for did get better, sometimes immediately and clearly miraculously, while sometimes more “naturally,” the body healing itself, as it most often does. But if the “prayer of trust” will heal the sick, why does it not work every time?

One of the keys to unlocking what James 5:15 is saying is that the previous verse, James 5:14, made it clear that the person or persons praying the “prayer of trust” is not the sick person himself, but a committed member of the Church, who is therefore called an “elder.” It is vital to understand this because even though Scripture teaches that the trust of the sick person is important for healing, that is not what “the prayer of trust” in James 5:15 is referring to. The context shows us that the “prayer of trust” is a prayer that someone prays for the one who is sick.

The most important key to understanding James 5:15 is knowing that the “prayer of trust,” refers to the “manifestation of trust,” which is one of the nine manifestations of the gift of holy spirit (1 Cor. 12:9). Most Christians have not been taught about the difference between “trust” and “the manifestation of trust.” It is therefore important to briefly talk about “the manifestation of trust” so we understand it. The manifestation of trust is a manifestation of the gift of holy spirit, and it is a person having the confidence or trust that what God or the Lord Jesus Christ has revealed to him by revelation will come to pass at his command.

[For more information on the manifestation of trust, see commentary on 1 Cor. 12:9, and for more on what revelation is and how it works, see commentary on Gal. 1:12.]

Regular “trust” is different from the manifestation of trust. All of us have regular trust in a large number of things. In fact, ordinary life would be impossible without trust. A person would not sit down on a chair if he did not trust it would hold him, and he would not take a drink of water if he did not trust it was safe. This “regular” trust that we use in everyday life is based on our experience, logic, and the evidence we see in front of us, and it is the trust that we have that Jesus was raised from the dead. At some point in our life, we had “enough proof” to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead, and we trusted in him and were saved.

In contrast to ordinary trust, the “manifestation of trust” is necessary to accomplish the special tasks that God, by revelation, asks us to do. For example, Jesus said that a person with trust could tell a mountain to be cast into the ocean and it would be done (Mark 11:23). Well, all of us have seen mountains, and we know that we do not have the human power to move them, so how can we just “trust” that we can cast a mountain into the sea just by commanding it to happen? We need to access the power of God to move the mountain. To be able to “trust” that God’s power is available to us to perform a miracle we need God to tell us by revelation that we can do it.

The way the manifestation of trust works is that God first tells us to do something by revelation. Then, having the revelation from God that we can do the miracle, we trust the revelation and command the miracle to happen. The trust we have in what God told us by revelation is “the manifestation of trust,” and when we trust what God has revealed to us—no matter how difficult it seems—miracles happen, just like they did in the Bible.

Learning about the manifestation of trust is made more difficult by the fact that often the Bible just says “trust” (“faith”) when the context dictates it is the manifestation of trust that is being referred to, and that is the case in James 5:15. While there are many records in the Bible that show God giving revelation first and then the person operating the manifestation of trust and accomplishing the miracle, there are also many records that do not explicitly state that God gave revelation first. Although this might seem confusing, it is simple to understand. God expects us to understand how the manifestation of trust works by studying the whole Bible. When there is a task that we cannot accomplish by our own natural human ability, then we need God’s power to do it, and that means we must have revelation from God that we can trust in. Once God gives us the revelation, we can then trust what He says and command the miracle, which God’s power then brings to pass.

When we understand the manifestation of trust we can see how inseparably it works with the other manifestations of the spirit. First, God tells us what we can do—He gives us revelation, which comes as either word of knowledge, word of wisdom, or discerning of spirits (see commentary on 1 Cor. 12:8). Then we, operating the manifestation of trust, trust without doubting what God just told us, no matter how impossible it seems. Then God brings the miracle to pass. This pattern occurs throughout the Scripture. For example, God told Moses what to do to split the Red Sea. Moses then trusted what God said and did not doubt it, and then God provided the power for the miracle and the sea split, allowing Israel to pass through to the other side. Similarly, God told Joshua what to do to defeat Jericho. Joshua trusted God completely and God provided the power that brought down the walls of Jericho.

Before we can do a miraculous healing, we have to hear from God that He will provide the power to heal. That explains why Jesus, the apostles, and people with great trust for healing never heal every single sick person, but heal some and not others. For example, in John 5 Jesus went to the Pool of Bethesda, where there was a great crowd of sick and lame people, but Jesus only healed one person—a lame man. Why only him? The Bible does not say, but God knows the situation of every person, and if He does not give us the revelation to heal a person, we cannot “just heal” based on our regular trust.

How do we know that the trust referred to in James 5:15 is the manifestation of trust and not “regular trust?” One way is that the immediate context mentions Elijah, who prayed for it not to rain in Israel (1 Kings 17:1), and for three and a half years there was no rain or dew in Israel. Without revelation from God Elijah could not have done that miracle. He never would have done it because without revelation Elijah would never have been sure that causing such hardship for the entire nation was the will of God. He never could have done it because even though Elijah was a man who trusted God, human trust alone cannot stop the forces of nature like rain and dew that God put in place to keep life on earth alive. Those kinds of results require the power of God, which means that God first has to give revelation about what He wants to happen, and then we operate the manifestation of trust to access the power of God and bring the miracle to pass.

In summary, we know that the “prayer of trust” referred to in James 5:15 cannot simply be referring to an elder praying for a sick person using “regular” trust because there are so many times when healing does not occur that way. The “prayer of trust” must be referring to a prayer prayed by revelation while the person praying is operating the manifestation of trust, because whenever a person ministers healing on the basis of revelation with the manifestation of trust, healing always occurs.

James 5:15 is a wonderful and encouraging verse because it reminds us that if God gives us revelation to heal, the prayer of trust will heal the person no matter how sick he is, like the lame man in Acts 3, or even if he is dead, like Tabitha in Acts 9. We cannot heal by our own “regular” trust, but “the prayer of the manifestation of trust” will heal the sick.

Jam 5:16

**“pray for one another.”** The context is prayer by revelation and healing via the manifestations of holy spirit, the manifestation of trust, and the manifestation of healing. When we pray by revelation and trust the revelation we have received, people get healed.

[For more information on prayer for healing, see commentary on James 5:15.]

**“one another.”** The phrase “one another” occurs in the context of the community of believers, and while we are to be good to everyone, in the context of the New Testament Epistles, the commands toward “one another” are specifically to other believers. Christians are to be “especially good to the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10). It is very important for the richness of our lives together here on earth, for our personal growth here on earth, and for rewards in the next life, that each Christian needs to be “other-focused,” focused on others and how we can help them. The phrase “one another” occurs many times in the New Testament, stating and reinforcing that truth.

[For more on the “one another” commands, see commentary on Gal. 5:13, “one another.” For more on “love one another,” see commentary on John 13:34.]

**“The prayer.”** The Greek word is deēsis (#1162 δέησις), which refers to an urgent prayer to meet a need. This is in contrast to “and pray for one another,” where *euchomai* was used, a much more general term for prayer.

Jam 5:17

**“he prayed a fervent prayer.”** The Greek has a beautiful polyptoton emphasizing the fervency of the action.[[21]](#footnote-15350)

[See Word Study: “Polyptoton.”]

Jam 5:19

**“brothers and sisters.”** See Word Study: “Adelphos.”

Jam 5:20

**“soul.”** In this context, “soul” refers to the life of the body. See commentary on Romans 11:3.

1. See BDAG, s.v. “καύσων.” [↑](#footnote-ref-24515)
2. Cf. Robertson, *Word Pictures*, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-31355)
3. Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James* [PNTC], 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-20541)
4. Ralph Martin, *James* [WBC], 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-24484)
5. See Bullinger, Figures of Speech, 804, “amphibologia.” [↑](#footnote-ref-18501)
6. See Adamson, *The Epistle of James* [NICNT], 96-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-18251)
7. Cf. James Adamson, *The Epistle of James* [NICNT], 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-13926)
8. Laws, *The Epistle of James* [BNTC]. [↑](#footnote-ref-31062)
9. Easton, *Easton’s Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “face.” [↑](#footnote-ref-21958)
10. R. Omanson, *A Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament*. [↑](#footnote-ref-28671)
11. *Meyer’s Commentary: James*, 113; Blomberg and Kamell, *James* [ZECNT]; Moo, *Lettter of James* [PNTC], 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-12192)
12. Vincent, *Word Studies*. [↑](#footnote-ref-22905)
13. see Lenski. [↑](#footnote-ref-30333)
14. D. Moo, *Letter of James* [PNTC], 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-17359)
15. Cf. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech*, 538, “metonymy.” [↑](#footnote-ref-28702)
16. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6:51-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-29972)
17. David Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*. [↑](#footnote-ref-19962)
18. Cf. Scott McKnight, *The Letter of James* [NICNT], 337-38. [↑](#footnote-ref-30172)
19. Thayer, s.v. “κακοπαθέω.” [↑](#footnote-ref-18038)
20. *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-32692)
21. See Bullinger, *Figures of Speech*, 267, “polyptoton.” [↑](#footnote-ref-15350)