

Fact Sheet for **“The Key to Unlocking James”**
James 1:9-15

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This is the most important sermon I will preach in James. If I am right in my interpretation then this sermon will be the key to unlocking much of what James wrote. But it is also the most dangerous sermon I will preach in James. If I am wrong in my interpretation then my words will give you a skewed idea about many of the things James wrote. Follow along with me... then make your decision.

James, author of this book and Jesus half-brother, didn't believe in Him even six months before Jesus was crucified (Jn. 7:5). But after the resurrection Jesus appeared to him (1 Cor. 15:7). James had watched Jesus be crucified, and had spoken with Him after His resurrection. He soon became the leader of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13-21; 21:8; Gal. 2:9).

The first four paragraphs of James' letter read as follows...

Paragraph #1 (1:2-4)

² Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials (pei-ras-mos') of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴ And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

These verses speak of standing firm in the face of trials.

Paragraph #2 (1:5-8)

⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. ⁶ But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

These verses are about asking God for wisdom when you need it.

Paragraph #3 (1:9-11)

⁹ Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, ¹⁰ and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. ¹¹ For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

These verses remind us that those who are rich pass away.

Paragraph #4 (1:12-15)

¹² Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial (pei-ras-mos'), for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. ¹³ Let no one say when he is tempted (pei-radz'-o), "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. ¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

This paragraph explains that we are tempted by our own desires.

Now, here's the big question. Do these four paragraphs speak of stand-alone ideas, or are they all four intimately related in why James wrote this letter? One commentator states, "One of the major debates over how to interpret James concerns the letter's structure. Some

have asserted that James is a rather disconnected collection of sayings, while others have contended that it is a well-organized and coherent letter centering on a theme or set of themes.”¹ One idea that has been put forward is that the book of James is much like the book of Proverbs... a collection of short wise sayings. Another commentator wrote, “The epistle demonstrates a marked unity and a clear goal.”² But even this commentator only goes as far as saying this letter deals with the Christian faith and how to achieve spiritual maturity.

I’m going to take a different approach. I don’t think that James is writing like the book of Proverbs. And I also think that what James wrote is linked by more than a description of a Christian’s spiritual life and maturity. Instead I think that these four paragraphs are intimately related, and that they tell a lot about the readers of this book.

Look at verses 2-3 again that begin the 1st of these four paragraphs.

² Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials (pei-ras-mos’) of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.

Now look at verse 12 that begins the 4th of these paragraphs.

¹² Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial (pei-ras-mos’), for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

The words James uses in these verses are remarkably similar. My understanding is that verse 12 is a continuation of the thought that began in verses 2-3. This is almost self-evident. If this is right, then James’ 2nd paragraph about asking God for wisdom is what I should do when I am tested. This again is easy to see. What is much more difficult to see is how James’ words in the 3rd paragraph, about those who are rich passing away, fits into his line of reasoning.

Now look at verses 13-15 again. The word for “tempted” in these verses is the verb form of the noun for “trial” both in verse 2 and in verse 12. In addition verse 12 is quite commonly understood to start one paragraph that continues through verse 15. So, it’s a real possibility that the trials of verses 2 and 12 could be directly related to the temptations of verses 13-14.

And, look at how many times money, or the lack of it, comes up in this book (2:1, 15-16; 4:2, 13; 5:1). James’ words in his 3rd paragraph fits right in with these other verses. Notice too that these verses point to more than that the rich will pass away. They show that the poor and the rich alike have an opportunity to boast, not in their present financial situation, but in their eternal standing through Jesus Christ.

Here’s the upshot. I am convinced that those James is writing to are experiencing the temptations that come along with the subtle and inordinate desire to be rich and the ugly results of those desires in their interpersonal relationships with other believers. James presented a clear alternative to this desire to get rich... a mature and steadfast faith in God. James, first-handedly, knew this to be the most valuable pursuit in life.

When you think of it life really hasn’t changed much today. The temptations are still the same.

Trust God. Pursue that mature and steadfast faith in Him!

¹ The New American Commentary, James, p.25.

² The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament, p. 818.