



The Letter of James Bible Study Session 16 James 5:19-20

Study By
Lorin L Cranford

Greek NT

^{5:19} Ἀδελφοί μου, ἐάν τις ἐν ὑμῖν πλανηθῆ ἀπὸ τῆς ἀληθείας καὶ ἐπιστρέψῃ τις αὐτόν,^{5:20} γινωσκέτω ὅτι ὁ ἐπιστρέψας ἀμαρτωλὸν ἐκ πλάνης ὁδοῦ αὐτοῦ σώσει ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἐκ θανάτου καὶ καλύψει πλῆθος ἀμαρτιῶν.

Die Gute Nachricht Bibel

¹⁹Meine Brüder und Schwestern, wenn jemand unter euch vom rechten Weg abirrt und ein anderer bringt ihn zur Umkehr,²⁰ dann soll der wissen: Wer einen Menschen, der sündigt, von seinem Irrweg abbringt, rettet ihn vor dem Tod und macht viele eigene Sünden gut.

NRSV

¹⁹My brothers and sisters,^{F29} if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another,²⁰ you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's^{F30} soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Footnotes:
F29: Gk [My brothers]
F30: Gk [his]

NLT

^{5:19}My dear brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders away from the truth and is brought back again,^{5:20} you can be sure that the one who brings that person back will save that sinner from death and bring about the forgiveness of many sins.

The Study of the Text:¹

Context of our passage:

STRUCTURAL OUTLINE OF TEXT Of James²

PRÆSCRIPTIO BODY		1.1 1.2-5.20
Facing Trials	1-15	1.2-12
God and Temptation	16-24	1.13-18
The Word and Piety	25-37	1.19-27
Faith and Partiality	38-55	2.1-13
Faith and Works	56-72	2.14-26
Controlling the Tongue	73-93	3.1-12
True and False Wisdom	94-102	3.13-18
Solving Divisions	103-133	4.1-10
Criticism	134-140	4.11-12
Leaving God Out	141-146	4.13-17
Danger in Wealth	147-161	5.1-6
Persevering under Trial	162-171	5.7-11
Swearing	172-174	5.12
Reaching Out to God	175-193	5.13-18
Reclaiming the Wayward	194	5.19-20

Literary Setting:

The literary setting of this pericope, as the final passage in the document, is puzzling. Scholarly speculation about its role is largely guesswork with little concrete evidence to support it. Peter Davids in the *New International Greek Testament Commentary*, p. 198, conjectures that “James concludes with a final exhortation which on the one hand flows out of the theme of confession and forgiveness of the preceding section (5:13-18) and on the other gives what must have been the author’s purpose in publishing the epistle, i.e., turning or preserving people from error (cf. the similarity in 1 Jn. 5:21).” Wolfgang Schrage in *Das Neue Testament Deutsch* series, vol. 10, pages 58-59, more helpfully calls attention to the rather frequent pattern in early Christian authors of inserting exhortations about apostasy at the end of their writings [“Daß der „Brief“ mit dieser Mahnung schließt, beweist nicht die besondere Dringlichkeit gerade dieser Paränese. Vielmehr scheint der Verfasser einem verbreiteten formgeschichtliche Gesetz zu folgen, nach dem

¹With each study we will ask two basic questions. First, what was the most likely meaning that the first readers of this text understood? This is called the ‘historical meaning’ of the text. That must be determined, because it becomes the foundation for the second question, “What does the text mean to us today?” For any applicational meaning of the text for modern life to be valid it must grow out of the historical meaning of the text. Otherwise, the perceived meaning becomes false and easily leads to wrong belief.

²Taken from Lorin L. Cranford, *A Study Manual of James: Greek Text* (Fort Worth: Scripta Publications, Inc., 1988), 285. **Statements** indicate core thought expressions in the text as a basis for schematizing the rhetorical structure of the text. These are found in the Study Manual and also at the James Study internet site.

Mahnungen über Irrlehrer am Schluß von Briefen stehen (vgl. Gal.6,11ff.; 1.Kor.16,22; Jud. 17ff.; 2.Petr. 3,2ff.; Did. 16 u.ö).”].

In light of this compare Jas. 5:19-20 with the following texts:

Jas. 5:19-20 (NRSV). 19 My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, 20 you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

<p>Gal. 6:11-18 (NRSV). 11 See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand! 12 It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised — only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. 13 Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. 14 May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. 15 For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! 16 As for those who will follow this rule — peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God. 17 From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body. 18 May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.</p>	<p>Jude 17-25 (NRSV). 17 But you, beloved, must remember the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; 18 for they said to you, “In the last time there will be scoffers, indulging their own ungodly lusts.” 19 It is these worldly people, devoid of the Spirit, who are causing divisions. 20 But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; 21 keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. 22 And have mercy on some who are wavering; 23 save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies. 24 Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, 25 to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.</p>
<p>1 Cor. 16:22 (NRSV). 19 The churches of Asia send greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, greet you warmly in the Lord. 20 All the brothers and sisters send greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss. 21 I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. 22 Let anyone be accursed who has no love for the Lord. Our Lord, come! 23 The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. 24 My love be with all of you in Christ Jesus. D i d a c h e 16 Watch for your life’s sake. Let not your lamps be quenched, nor your loins unloosed; but be ready, for you know not the hour in which our Lord will come. But come together often, seeking the things which are befitting to your souls: for the whole time of your faith will not profit you, if you are not made perfect in the last time. For in the last days false prophets and corrupters shall be multiplied, and the sheep shall be turned into wolves, and love shall be turned into hate; for when lawlessness increases, they shall hate and persecute and betray one another, and then shall appear the world-deceiver as Son of God, and shall do signs and wonders, and the earth shall be delivered into his hands, and he shall do iniquitous things which have never yet come to pass since the beginning. Then shall the creation of men come into the fire of trial, and many shall be made to stumble and shall perish; but those who endure in their faith shall be saved from under the curse itself. And then shall appear the signs of the truth: first, the sign of an outspreading in heaven, then the sign of the sound of the trumpet. And third, the resurrection of the dead — yet not of all, but as it is said: “The Lord shall come and all His saints with Him.” Then shall the world see the Lord coming upon the clouds of heaven.</p>	<p>2 Peter 3:2-18 (NRSV). 1 This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you; in them I am trying to arouse your sincere intention by reminding you 2 that you should remember the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets, and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken through your apostles. 3 First of all you must understand this, that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts 4 and saying, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!” 5 They deliberately ignore this fact, that by the word of God heavens existed long ago and an earth was formed out of water and by means of water, 6 through which the world of that time was deluged with water and perished. 7 But by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the godless. 8 But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. 9 The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed. 11 Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, 12 waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? 13 But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. 14 Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; 15 and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation. So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, 16 speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures. 17 You therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, beware that you are not carried away with the error of the lawless and lose your own stability. 18 But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.</p>

List both the similarities and the differences among these New Testament and Apostolic Fathers writings in the endings

of their documents. What insights about James' ending of his writing can be gleaned from these materials.

Historical Setting:

Ralph Martin summarizes the historical linkage of this passage:³

The short conclusion gives the appearance of being an isolated unit, devoted to the topos of pastoral care. The idioms are OT-Jewish (with terms like “stray,” “truth,” “error”; cf. the Dead Sea Scrolls evidence in Nötscher, “Wahrheit”), though it may be observed that James speaks of “the error of his way” rather than the way of error, as in Jewish (Wisd Sol 12:24) and Christian Two Ways teaching (in Matt 7:13–14; 21:32; Barnabas, Did. chaps. 1–4). Nor should it be supposed that doctrinal error leading to heresy is chiefly envisaged. The stress, as throughout the letter, is on practical faith, on orthopraxis more than orthodoxy, as 3:13–18 illustrate.

The pastoralia, however, does resemble the ethos and directives of the Rule of the Community (1QS) at Qumran, and even more the situation in Matt 18:15–17 with its individualizing tones (cf. Bonnard, “Matthieu éducateur du peuple chrétien,” 1–7) and its stress on the sin of abandoning the fellowship and the steps required to readmit the sinner to community life. We cannot locate the setting of 5:19–20 with any great precision, but if we imagine with James or the redactor a tightly knit and persecuted community from which the temptation to defect was ever-present, it is easy to see how the pastor would want to encourage his people to have regard to the wayward member and to make an effort actively to restore such a person.

Exegesis of the Text:

1. What did the text mean to the first readers?

5.19 My brothers,
 if any of you is led astray
 from the Truth

 and
 -- someone turns him back,
194 5.20 **Know**
 that the one turning the sinner back...will save his soul from death,
 from the error of his way

 and
 ----- will cover a multitude of sins.

Summary:

The rhetorical structure of this passage is very simple, since it is composed of a single sentence. The core expression of this ‘third class conditional sentence’ in the Greek text is the admonition ‘know.’ The reader is admonished to realize something. The content of what is to be realized is defined in the direct object ‘that-clause’ and covers two things -- saving and covering. The situation prerequisite for the admonition is defined by the ‘if-clause’ which describes a Christian brother having gone astray and another Christian brother having led the wayward brother back to the Truth.

Although the rhetorical structure of the sentence is very simple, the declaration nonetheless sets forth one of the more controversial views found in all of the New Testament. Roman Catholics and Protestants have fought over this sentence for centuries. Protestants, among themselves, have exhibited sharp disagreements over the precise meaning of the sentence.

Exegetical Questions:

- 1) Identify the three individuals present in Jas. 5:19-20
- 2) What is the spiritual status of the “any of you” individual?
- 3) Compare Jas. 5:19 to Jas. 1:18 and Jas. 3:14. What expression is common to these three verses? What is its meaning?

Jas. 5:19 (NRSV). 19 My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from <i>the truth</i> and is brought back by another,	Jas. 1:18 (NRSV). 18 In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by <i>the word of truth</i> , so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.	Jas. 3:14 (NRSV). 14 But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to <i>the truth</i> .
--	---	---

- 4) What is the nature of “led astray” and “turning the sinner back from the error of his way”? Moral failure? Doctrinal error?

³Ralph P. Martin, vol. 48, *Word Biblical Commentary: James*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 217. Page 3 of James 5:19-20 Study

5) Compare several translations of the main clause verb in statement 194. What is the Greek text uncertainty behind the translation alternatives?

Form Oriented Translations:	Mixed Method Translations:	Content Oriented Translations:
KJV 20 Let him know,	RSV 5:20 let him know	NLT 5:20 you can be sure
NKJV 20 let him know	NRSV 20 you should know	GNT 5:20 remember this:
NASB 5:20 let him know	NIV 20 remember this:	BBE 20 Be certain

6) Compare James 5:20 to Daniel 12:3.

Jas. 5:20 (NRSV). 20 you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.	Daniel 12:3 (NRSV). 1 "At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. 2 Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. 3 Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. 4 But you, Daniel, keep the words secret and the book sealed until the time of the end. Many shall be running back and forth, and evil shall increase."
---	--

Explain the connection between these two passages.

7) Compare James 5:20 to the following ancient Jewish and Christian texts.

Jas. 5:20 (NRSV). 20 you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.	Tobit 4:10 (NRSV). 10 For almsgiving delivers from death and keeps you from going into the Darkness.	Sirach 3:30 (NRSV). 30 As water extinguishes a blazing fire, so almsgiving atones for sin.
Didache 4:6-7. 4:6 If thou hast, give by means of thy hands a redemption for thy sins. 4:7 Thou shalt not doubt to give, neither shalt thou murmur when giving; for thou shouldst know who is the fair recompenser of the reward.	Tobit 12:9 (NRSV). 9 For almsgiving saves from death and purges away every sin. Those who give alms will enjoy a full life, 10 but those who commit sin and do wrong are their own worst enemies.	Barnabas 19:10. Thou shalt remember the day of judgment, night and day. Thou shalt seek out every day the faces of the saints, either by word examining them, and going to exhort them, and meditating how to save a soul by the word, or by thy hands thou shalt labour for the redemption of thy sins.

Explain the viewpoints of the **Jewish writings** from *Tobit* and *Sirach* in relationship to James. These writings came before James. Are they the same? Or different?

Explain the viewpoints of the early **Christian Apostolic Fathers** writings from *Didache* and *Barnabas* in relationship to James. These writings came after James. Are they the same? Or different?

8) Whose sins are covered in James 5:19-20? The converted's? The converter's?

9) Compare James 5:19-20 to the following texts.

Jas. 5:19-20 (NRSV). 19 My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, 20 you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Gal. 6:1-2 (NRSV). 1 My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. 2 Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.	1 Thess. 5:14 (NRSV). 14 And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them.
2 Thess. 3:14-15 (NRSV). 13 Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right. 14 Take note of those who do not obey what we say in this letter; have nothing to do with them, so that they may be ashamed. 15 Do not regard them as enemies, but warn them as believers.	Jude 22-23 (NRSV). 22 And have mercy on some who are wavering; 23 save others by snatching them out of the fire; and have mercy on still others with fear, hating even the tunic defiled by their bodies.

What is the common perspective of all these passages from the New Testament?

2. What does the text mean to us today?

1) Have you ever been “back-slidden”? Describe your spiritual life during that period of time.

2) Have you ever helped a fellow Christian ‘get right with the Lord’ in a renewal of Christian commitment? Describe how you felt doing that.

