

## “Save a Life!” (James 5:19–20)

Ten years ago this summer we were serving in a pastorate in Corvallis, OR. One evening Lori went off to worship practice and I stayed at home with our two young boys. Shortly after Lori left the house, I realized that eighteen month old Justin was missing. I began looking all over the house for him. When I couldn't find him, I called three-year-old Joshua to help me. We still couldn't find him. We began to panic. At that moment, a neighbor knocked on our door and said, “Are you looking for your son?” I said, “Yes! Where is he?” She replied, “He’s walking down the street toward Highway 20.” I said, “What?!” I then immediately bolted out of our house like lightning. I began shouting, “Justin, stop! Stop, Justin, stop!” Of course, you can probably guess what happened. The moment Justin heard me he yelling his name he rebelliously kicked it into overdrive as fast as his little legs could carry him. Fortunately, he was no match for my blazing speed and I was able to grab him just before he walked into the highway traffic. As I took him into my arms I said, “Don’t you ever do this again, especially when your Mom is away!” The nearly tragic moral of this story is: When Justin decided to take a dangerous road and stray from our house, he jeopardized his life. It took his Dad running after him to rescue him.

Like an earthly father, God is vitally concerned about the road His children take. Like any decent earthly father, He’ll also do whatever it takes to protect His children. Perhaps you know what it’s like to take a road of rebellion away from God only to have someone track you down and save you from many wasted years. Maybe you’ve experienced the fulfillment of rescuing a fellow believer from grave sin. In either case, God loves to *rescue spiritual strays*. Nowhere is this truth more apparent than in James 5:19–20. In two short verses, God commands us to diligently pursue His kids that take the wrong road.<sup>1</sup> *Rescue spiritual strays*. Look carefully at James’ words. **“My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”**

James concludes his “in your face,” down and dirty letter with a warning about individuals who may **“stray from the truth.”** This warning is rather disturbing, so let’s make sure we understand it properly. First, we must recognize that James is writing to believers. He calls his readers **“brethren.”** This endearing term for believers is used fifteen times in James.<sup>2</sup> In case there is any question to the meaning of this term, in three of those usages, James attaches the adjective “beloved.” Clearly, James is speaking to fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. This is also confirmed by the phrase **“any among you.”** The wanderer in question is identified as **“among you,”** that is, as one among the **“brethren”** to whom James has just referred.<sup>3</sup> The word translated **“any”** by the NASB is a word that should be rendered “anyone,” as it is in 5:13–14. In these verses, no one questions the identity of the one who is suffering, cheerful or healed. It is a believer. This is also the case in 5:19a.<sup>4</sup> However, this believer **“strays”** (*planao*)<sup>5</sup> or “wanders away.”<sup>6</sup> As the ancients watched and mapped the night sky, they saw that certain “stars” did not follow a regular orbit. We know these today as our solar system’s planets. They called them “the wanderers.” In 5:19, *planao* portrays a believer in proper orbit around the Son of God, but he strays out of his appointed place in the heavens. Here is a believer who was reflecting the light of the Son for His glory, but some sort of black hole of temptation has sucked him out of orbit.<sup>7</sup>

James’ concern is for believers who go astray from God’s Word. In this context, straying from **“the truth”** (cf. 3:14) concerns moral compromise, not doctrinal defection.<sup>8</sup> This is evident from the content of the entire letter. James repeatedly exhorts his readers to live godly lives, on some occasions also rebuking them for practicing evil.<sup>9</sup> Yet, he nowhere expresses concerns with their doctrine. This becomes intensely practical for our church. Many of us feel comfortable with our Christian beliefs and our Bible knowledge. But James says, “Your beliefs are not necessarily your problem; your behavior is what you must watch out for. James wants you to first watch out for yourself and your own behavior and then watch over your brothers and sisters. *Rescue spiritual strays*.”

James asks his readers to confront those who wander from the truth and attempt to bring them back to the truth. The word **“turns him back”** means “to turn about, turn towards.” The idea is to return to a point or area where one has been before. Love will take the risk of confronting a fellow Christian who gets off track. We need to bring back backslidden believers to fellowship.<sup>10</sup> Christ used this word “turned” (*epistrepho*) in reference to the defection and restoration of Peter (cf. Luke 22:32). This serves as the best parallel usage. Like Peter, believers can stray from the Lord. As a result, we are responsible to turn fellow believers back to the Lord so that their fellowship can be renewed (see Gal 6:1–3). Rather than condemnation, restoration is always the goal. Jesus exemplified this approach in His restoration of Peter (John 21:15–19). Likewise, we must seek to *rescue spiritual strays*.

Now you’d be petrified if your doctor came in with a diagnosis of cancer and then told you, “Take two aspirin and get plenty of rest.” You’d be horrified if your house was on fire and the firefighters told you, “Don’t worry. It will burn itself out after a while.” You’d be shocked if a police officer watched a gang beating up an old man and said, “Well, boys will be boys.” Doctors, firefighters, and police officers who respond this way clearly don’t know their jobs. And a Christian who sees a brother or sister and says, “That’s not my concern” doesn’t understand the job God has assigned to us. You and I are to save endangered souls from death.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to note that James utilizes an indefinite pronoun (“one”) when he refers to the one who turns the offender back from his sin. The apostle could have referred to elders (5:13–18) or a pastor, but he deliberately includes any member of the church in the work of spiritual restoration. Many times Christians assume that this is the role of pastors and elders, but this is actually the responsibility of every believer. Stop and think about this for a moment. If you are a wandering believer who is skipping out on church, failing to read the Word, and living in sin, or even welcome a call from “Pastor Keith.” If your caller ID flashes “Keith Krell” or “Emmanuel Bible Fellowship,” there’s no way you’re going to pick up that phone. If I was straying from the Lord, I wouldn’t either. But in some cases, if you have a close relationship with a brother or sister from the church or your small group, you might just pick up the phone. Not only are pastors and elders often unsuccessful at rescuing spiritual strays, they often aren’t the best choices because they don’t have a personal relationship with the wandering believer. Nevertheless, we all must do our part. Experts say the hardest people for a church to reach are those who have fallen away. According to studies in churches, it usually takes at least eight contacts before they will consider returning. Hence, we need to go after straying believers as quickly as possible because if their heart hardens, we may never see them again.

In 5:20 James concludes his letter with an imperative and a word of encouragement. He writes: **“let him know that he who turns<sup>12</sup> a sinner from the error of his way will save<sup>13</sup> his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.”<sup>14</sup>** The command **“let him know”<sup>15</sup>** (*ginoskete*, present active imperative) is something that believers need to understand and appreciate. The work of restoring a wandering Christian is of tremendous importance and well worth the toil and agony that are often involved. We may forget how important it is to take the initiative and bring a wanderer back, because we get involved in our own life, family and circle of friends. But we are commanded to recognize the value in risking a relationship and taking time to prioritize the spiritual well-being of another believer.

Interestingly, James calls the backslider a **“sinner”** because he or she has strayed from the truth (cf. 3:14). Indeed, this description is a reference to a wayward believer. Although this is surprisingly harsh language, there is precedence for this in Jas 4:8. Here, James solemnly commands his readers, “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” The description **“sinner(s)”** does not refer to one’s nature; it refers to one’s practice. Scripture and experience dictates that it is quite possible for a saint to live like a sinner.

The word “**error**” (*planes*) is the same basic word translated “**strays**” in 5:19. Two things are accomplished when a sinning Christian is turned from the error of his way: a soul is saved from death and a multitude of sins are covered. By turning a sinning Christian from his wandering ways, we provide the occasion for God to wipe away the sins rather than bring discipline for them. The words “**save**” (*sozo*) and “**salvation**” (*soteria*) refer to two types of deliverance: temporal (e.g., deliverance from enemies, disease, death, ruin, etc.) and eternal (i.e., deliverance from eternal condemnation). A concordance study of the Old Testament reveals that 95% of the uses of the Hebrew words for salvation refer to temporal salvation of some type. In the New Testament the usages equal out so that 50% of the time temporal salvation is in view and 50% of the time eternal salvation.<sup>16</sup> James uses the terms “**save**” (*sozo*) five times in his letter (1:21; 2:14; 4:12; 5:15, 20). In all five passages, James addresses “brethren” and is referring to something other than going to heaven. For example, the word translated “**will save**” (*sosei*) is the same word translated “**will restore**” in 5:15. In 5:15, a brother is spiritually or physically delivered. In either case, eternal salvation is not being referred to.

The soul saved from death is that of the backslider to whom also belongs the multitude of sins. We should probably understand the “soul” to represent the whole person here as well as elsewhere in James’ letter (cf. 1:21).<sup>17</sup> Death represents the temporal destruction of the person, not his or her eternal damnation (cf. 1 Cor 11:30; 1 John 5:16). The repentance of the reclaimed sinning believer results in the forgiveness (covering) of his or her sins. This description of forgiveness harks back to Old Testament usage where the biblical writers described sin as covered when forgiven. Such usage was understandable for James who was a Jewish believer writing to other Jews primarily (1:1; cf. Matt 7:1–5; Gal 6:1–5). His description does not contradict other New Testament revelation concerning forgiveness.

A famous violinist was asked how long he practiced every day. He replied that he spent ten to twelve hours a day with his instrument. “What would happen if you slacked off,” he was asked. The violinist responded, “After one day I would know it. After two days, the conductor would know it. After three days, the orchestra would know it. After that, everybody would know it.”<sup>18</sup>

The words *save* and *salvation* in Scripture refer to two types of deliverance: temporal (e.g., deliverance from enemies, disease, death, ruin, etc.) and eternal (i.e., deliverance from eternal condemnation). A concordance study of the OT reveals that 95% of the uses of the Hebrew words for salvation refer to temporal salvation of some type. In the NT the usages equal out so that 50% of the time temporal salvation is in view and 50% of the time eternal salvation. Interestingly, there are no biblical uses of the expression *the salvation of the soul* in reference to eternal salvation from hell. As will be shown in future months, the saving of the soul refers to either, 1) saving one’s physical life from death, or, 2) saving up eternal joys and blessings, a superlative experience of eternal life—as one might save up money in a bank (see Matt 6:19–21). “Soul salvation” is not to be confused with eternal salvation from hell. The Greek word translated “**cover**” means “to hide, conceal or keep secret.”<sup>19</sup> With reference to the Judgment Seat of Christ, there will be less to give an accounting of. Not only will one’s physical life be persevered but so will the potential for one’s reward.

It’s scary to realize that most of the people who failed in Scriptures failed in the second half of their lives.

### **Scripture References**

James 5:19–20

James 4:6–10

1 Corinthians 3:1–3; 11:30

Galatians 2:11–14

Galatians 5:13–26

John 21:15–19

1 Thess 5:14–15

### **Study Questions**

1. When have I strayed from the truth? What did I learn from this season of rebellion? What can I learn from straying believers such as Lot, Jacob's sons, Amaziah, Uzziah, Saul, David, Solomon, Jonah, Ananias & Saphira, Peter, Simon Magus, Hymenaeus and Alexander, and Demas?
2. What does James mean by "stray from the truth?" Throughout his letter following examples are given: sinful speech, disobedience, unconcern for others, quarrelling, favoritism, unspiritual wisdom, boasting, oppression of the poor, inappropriate swearing, prayer without faith, etc. Which of these sins do I struggle with the most? How can I overcome this particular attitude or action?
3. Why would a brother "stray from the truth?" Read James 1:2–4; 2:6–7; 5:4–6, and 7–11. Two New Testament examples parallel these texts. John Mark ran away from the mission field apparently because of life's pressures (Acts 13:13) and Peter exhibited hypocrisy because he feared what the Jews would think of him (Galatians 2:11–14). How can I ensure that I guard my brothers and sisters in Christ from straying amidst persecution?
4. How can a believer "turn" a brother or sister back to the truth? Read Luke 22:32; John 21:15–19; Galatians 6:1–3; 1 Thessalonians 5:14–15; and Hebrews 3:13. How will my involvement in another believer's life "cover a multitude of sins?" Read Proverbs 10:12 and 1 Peter 4:8. Who will I save today?
5. Why does James call the backslider a "sinner?" Can this term really describe a believer? Read James 3:14 and 4:8. The description "sinner(s)" does not refer to one's nature; it refers to one's practice. Scripture and experience dictates that it is quite possible for a saint to live like a sinner. How can I avoid behavior that misrepresents my true identity?

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> James is my favorite book of the Bible because it is a book of action. There are fifty-four commands in the letter, about one for every two verses.

<sup>2</sup> James always uses the term “brethren” (*adelphos*) to refer to believers (Jas 1:2, 9; 16, 19. 2:1, 5, 14, 15; 3:1, 10, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 9, 10, 12, 19).

<sup>3</sup> The next phrase, “and someone turns him back,” decisively identifies the “anyone” of this verse as a fellow believer. Can an unbeliever be turned back to that which he has never believed? The very absurdity of such a proposition is easily envisioned in geographic terms: Unless a person has been in China, how can he wander away from it? Likewise, can a person be turned back to China, if he has never set foot in China? A person can neither wander away from nor turn back to China, if he has never been to China. James speaks of wandering “from the truth” and being returned to it. Remember that James 1:18 says that God brought believers forth (regeneration) by the “word of truth.” Indeed, James 5:19 speaks of an “anyone” who left the truth that regenerated him, and is now turned back by a “someone.” Within the immediate context both “anyone” and “someone” remain undefined except for their relationship to each other as regenerate “brethren” because they are children of God. Equally clear, the believer called “anyone” has wandered to the far country, far away from God, prior to “someone” turns him back. In light of the Genealogy of Death established in James 1:15, sin is maturing in the “anyone,” but not to the point that God has dealt with his sin through physical death, for indeed “someone turns him back.”

<sup>4</sup> Some scholars argue that this use of “brethren” refers to a professing Christians and possessing Christians. However, in Jas 1:16–18 the beloved brethren are identified as the “us” and “we” of 1:18, which includes James, the author. And the passage says that “we” have been “brought forth” (*apekuesen*—a birthing term) by the word of truth that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures. Could there be a more clear statement of spiritual birth? These beloved brethren have been “born again.” But 5:19 immediately addresses these “beloved brethren” again. Surely it is the same group he just addressed in 5:16–18. And will you notice that these beloved brethren are encouraged to receive the implanted Word with meekness, which is able to save their souls (*sosai tas psuchas*), the same Greek words we find in 5:20 in reference to the straying believer whose life has been turned around? No, the brother-is-not-a-brother argument is specious indeed. The only other way out of the obvious is to say the person who strays from the truth in 5:19 is not identified as a brother, but as *tis* (anyone), meaning a member of the congregation but not one of the brethren. Again, the suggestion is completely out of context. All one has to do is to look in the immediate context at 5:13–18 to see that *tis* has been used three other times to refer to believers in the congregation who have a certain need. Instructions are given as to how that need should be met. The sick person should call for the elders of the church, who will anoint him/her with oil and pray for that sick person. The prayer of faith will heal (*sōzō*) the sick. Surely no one will argue that this passage refers to an unbeliever. Neither should they argue based on the use of *tis* that Jas 5:19 refers to an unbeliever who strays from the truth. David R. Anderson, “Repentance is for All Men,” *JOTGES* 11.1 (Spr 1998): 20.

<sup>5</sup> *Planao* is a common word used in both testaments a total of 132 times (Isaiah uses it 31 times in the Greek Old Testament and Matthew’s Gospel and John’s Revelation have eight usages). In the Greek Old Testament (LXX), Isaiah uses this word when he states, “All of us like sheep have gone astray (*planao*), each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him” (Isa 53:6). *Planao* is often used of straying sheep (e.g., Isa 9:16; Ezek 34:4–5; Heb 5:2; 1 Pet 2:25). Jesus uses this term in Matt 18:12 of a sheep that has wandered off and must be recovered by the shepherd. Like sheep, believers are prone to wander. Even though we have a sinless Shepherd who loves us, protects us and has sacrificed Himself for us (John 10:1–30), we still wander away from the abundant life He promises (John 10:11). These passages can be supplemented with the great hymn, “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” The words, “Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; prone to leave the God I love” can describe even our Christian experience.

<sup>6</sup> BDAG s.v. *planao* 2b: “wander away.” For the rendering “wander(s),” see the ESV, NKJV, NRSV, NIV, and NLT.

<sup>7</sup> Anderson, “Repentance is for All Men,” 19.

<sup>8</sup> *Contra* Moo who argues that “since James suggests in v.20 that the ‘wandering’ Christian is saved from spiritual death, the deviation from the faith here must be a very serious one, tantamount to apostasy.” Douglas Moo, *The Letter of James* (), 249.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. 1:22–27; 2:1–13, 14–26; 3:14; 4:1–2, 11–12; 5:9.

<sup>10</sup> Believers have a responsibility to help one another (cf. 2 Cor 2:7; Gal 6:1; Eph. 4:32; 2 Thess 3:15).

<sup>11</sup> Tony Evans, *The Perfect Christian* (Nashville: Word, 1998), 253.

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<sup>12</sup> It is significant that the Greek word *epistrepho* is used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew term for “repentance” (*shuv*). Since Israel was considered the people of God, this “turning” was viewed as “turning back” to God or the renewing of a previous relationship. That same sense is reflected in this text in James.

<sup>13</sup> The word translated “will save” (*sosei*) is the same word translated “will restore” in 5:15.

<sup>14</sup> See the excellent comments of Kurt Richardson, *James*. New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1997), 244–45.

<sup>15</sup> The NIV translates this phrase, “Remember this.”

<sup>16</sup> See Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man* (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle, 1992), 342–44.

<sup>17</sup> Bob Wilkin, “Soul Talk, Soul Food, and ‘Soul Salvation,’” *Grace Evangelical Society News* 6:12 (December 1991) 2; and idem, “Soul Salvation,” Part 2; Saving the Soul of a Fellow Christian; James 5:19–20,” *Grace Evangelical Society News* 7:1 (Jan 1992): 2.

<sup>18</sup> John Phillips, *Exploring the Epistle of James: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004), 194.

<sup>19</sup> BDAG s.v. *kalupto* 2 cf. 1 Pet 4:8.