

A SUMMONS TO ACTION

JAMES 5 v 19 & 20

My brothers and sisters, if any of you wander away from the truth and another one brings them back again, remember this: whoever turns a sinner back from his or her wrong way will save that sinner's soul from death and bring about the forgiveness of many sins.

We come to our final study in the book of James. As we have observed in our previous studies, James covers many and diverse subjects. The first study had the title 'Practical Christianity'. There is no book in the bible that emphasises practical Christianity more than James. We now come to the end of the book; 5 v 19 & 20. Some commentators suggest that James' ending to the book is abrupt and disconnected, but nothing could be further from the truth. The ending is fitting because it expresses James' loving concern for the welfare of the church as a whole. Once again James addresses the members of the church as 'brothers and sisters'; v 19a. It is significant James uses this form of address because in it we get an impression of his deep, sympathetic, warm, practical understanding of the church's needs. James clearly identifies with the members of the church.

Do we regard the members of the church we belong to as our brothers and sisters? Do we identify with them? Are we concerned for them? James has something important to write about; v 19b & 20. Douglas Moo writes; **"James closes his letter not with the greetings and benediction typical of epistolary endings, but with a summons to action. In this, his letter is typical of other more 'formal' New Testament letters that read almost like sermons. For a last time James addresses his brothers and sisters. He has spoken to them in his letter about many problems: sinful speech, disobedience, unconcern about others, worldliness, quarrelling, arrogance. Now he encourages every believer to take the initiative in bringing any who have 'wandered from the truth' in any of these ways back into fellowship with God and the community"**. The truth here does not refer to Christian doctrine in the narrow sense, but more broadly to all that is involved in the gospel. As we have seen repeatedly throughout James' letter this truth is something that is to be 'done' as well as believed. For James, correct doctrine cannot be separated from correct behaviour. The two are inextricably linked. I cannot over emphasise this. Separating doctrine from behaviour is all too common in the church today.

The Greek word 'planao' translated 'wanders' from which the word 'planet', a 'heavenly wanderer', is taken, should not be restricted to an inadvertent or unconscious departure from 'the truth'. It was widely used to describe any deviation from the 'way of righteousness' whether wilful or not; 1 Peter 2 v 25 *"For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls"*; 2 Peter 2 v 15 *"They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Beor, who loved the wages of wickedness"*.

This straying is described as ‘the error of his way’; v 20. It could be translated ‘his/her wandering way’. All of us have a pastoral responsibility to rescue Christians who have wandered far from the right way. We mustn’t leave this to the minister/pastor and elders or equivalent leaders. To do so is a dereliction of our duty. It may be very difficult to get Christians to return to the right way and get them back to the truth, but we should spare no effort to do so. Eugene Peterson in *The Message* paraphrases v 20; **“you will have rescued precious lives from destruction and prevented an epidemic of wandering away from God”**.

The overall theme of these studies has been, ‘Practical Christianity’. When all is said and done, what really matters is how we live out our Christian belief from day to day. If people are not convinced by the authenticity of our Christian lives, they will never be attracted to Christianity. The book of James is a treasure chest of practical advice about how to live the Christian life. The New Testament would be so impoverished without it. Let me end these studies with a lengthy quote from N T Wright’s commentary on James; **“James knew that his older brother, Jesus himself, had embodied new life and forgiveness. He had hung at the place where new life and forgiveness came bursting through from God’s world to ours. Everything James has been saying flows from that astonishing fact. To learn, with James, to understand and obey ‘the royal law’ of love is to get to know Jesus himself. And as that happens, so the patience and humility, the love and the prayer, the wisdom and the true speech on which he has been insisting will become part of our lives. These are the ‘works’ which will demonstrate our faith”**. We have come to the end of our studies in the book of James. As we reflect on all that James has taught us, we can truthfully say that his most practical book is a summons to action.