

Semper Fi

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[0 : 00] Never to be outdone by a depressive like me, James begins and ends his book on what we might call a downer, but what I prefer to call a realistic assessment of the Christian life.

He begins his book with the spiritual battles a Christian faces in life, and he ends his book with the spiritual backslidings the Christian faces in life.

Well, what did you expect? The Bible isn't a book of fairy stories, each with the ending, and they all lived happily after. Rather, it's a true-to-life account of real-life situations where the grace of Christ in the gospel proves more than sufficient.

Tell me, have you discovered that for yourself? By whatever the situations you have faced or are facing now, that the grace of Christ is enough, that when you're weak, then you're strong, that the Christian life does not consist in the avoidance of battles, but by the grace of Christ in the winning of battles.

Now, these verses seem a very strange place to end a letter. One might thought that, like the other New Testament writers, James would have chosen to end his lecture with some greeting, like, grace be with you all, or I send you my greetings.

[1 : 42] That is until you realize that James the pastor only has a few words to write, and therefore the few words he has must pack the biggest pastoral punch.

And could there be a bigger pastoral punch than this? My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover over a multitude of sins.

How important restoration must be in the life of today's church. How important it is that Christians, restored to and by Jesus Christ and following his restorations, following him as his disciples, rather, we ourselves model restoration.

that we don't shoot our wounded, but rather carry with us the motto of the United States Marine Corps, Semper Fi.

We're always loyal to our comrades in arms, even when they are so spiritually wounded that they no longer want our help. How does this motto, Semper Fi, work in the life of a Christian fellowship like ours?

[3 : 05] What is the best way to give tribute to James' exposition of faith at work? In this book, he has bequeathed to us in the Bible.

Let me suggest that briefly tonight, we can unpack the message of James 5, 19 through 20 in two ways. First, the ugly reality of the spiritual wanderer, the ugly reality of the spiritual wanderer, and secondly, the beautiful restoration of the spiritual wanderer, the beautiful restoration of the spiritual wanderer.

All the way through the sermon tonight, ask yourself who you know has wandered from the truth, who once was among us, but has now wandered from the truth, and prayerfully begin to make solid plans to bring him back.

First of all then, the ugly reality of the spiritual wanderer. The ugly reality of the spiritual wanderer. You know, I wish I could tell you that the kind of scenario James is describing in these verses never happens.

I wish I could tell you that there are no occasions where someone who was part of our fellowship falls away from the faith. I'm not talking about them leaving to go to another church.

[4 : 36] I'm talking about them leaving church to go nowhere. Abandoning the faith altogether. I wish I could tell you that it never happened in the past to us.

That it is not happening now to us. And it will not happen in the future to us. When I came here as minister in September 2003, one of my first pastoral visits was to a lady who used to be part of our

church, but had walked away.

In my naivety, in my youthful exuberance, I thought I could persuade her to return. Naive, I say, because I left her apartment on the south side with my tail firmly fixed between my legs. She left me under no illusion. She was never coming back, not just to our church, but to any church. She wanted nothing more to do with God.

That's happened a few times since. And as we begin to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, it's going to happen again here.

[5 : 48] It's an ugly thing to say, but you know when Jesus spoke about seed being sown in four types of soil, he wasn't kidding. There will be many among us who will not stay the course, but for any number of reasons will wander and stray from their faith in Christ.

Well, everyone, to call a spade a spade and to call things out for what they are, James begins verse 19 with the words, my brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth.

It happens in every church. In James' church, it happened. Yes, even this early Christian church we so hold up as being everything to which we aspire happened there.

Let's consider this ugliness under two headings, the wandering and the wanderers, the wandering and the wanderers, the wandering first of all.

The English Standard Version translates this verse as, if anyone among you wanders from the truth. The King James Version, with which many of us were brought up, renders it as, brethren, if any among you do err from the truth.

[7 : 07] The Holman Christian Standard Bible, my personal reading Bible, translates it as, my brothers, if any among you strays from the truth.

You've got these three words. Wanders, strays, errs, wandering from the truth, straying from the truth, erring from the truth.

We get the idea. Here's a person who is well on his way from truth to falsehood. Another possible translation is that they have been deceived.

Or as we might say today, they're living a lie. They're wandering. They're going astray. It's exactly the same word used in Isaiah 53, 6 to describe we all like sheep have gone astray.

They used to be part of a flock following a shepherd, but now they're off on their own. They're wandering from pillar to post. They have no end in sight.

[8 : 09] They've been deceived by the shiny tat of this world's gold. They're living the lie that this world is all that there is and that its pleasures are greater than any other.

They're erring. They're wrong. Now, we don't like today to say of anyone or anything that it's wrong. We like to talk of people having different points of view.

But James is in no mood to leave us confused. These Christians are wandering from the truth. They are wandering from the truth, meaning that they are wandering toward the lie.

They are wandering from wisdom. They are wandering toward foolishness. So, you see, the variety and richness of the English translations of the Greek word allow us unprecedented access into the various processes by which someone may fall away from the gospel.

It may be a conscious decision to err from the truth, to consciously turn away from the truth of the gospel. It may be a gradual wandering from the truth, an almost unconscious, subliminal falling away.

[9 : 31] It may be an active decision to pursue a wrong course of action in life, to pursue an illicit relationship, to sacrifice one's faith on the altar of one's career, or to fit in with the rest of society.

It may be a passive decision which leads to you falling away. You've stopped praying. You've stopped reading your Bible for yourself.

You can't be bothered with church anymore. You've got no real enthusiasm for anything to do with spiritual things. conscious or subconscious, active or passive.

For whatever reason, James is describing someone who was wandering from the truth. Do you recognize yourself here? Do you recognize someone that perhaps you know here?

Furthermore, for James, the truth is not just concerned with what we believe, but how we live.

Remember, the theme of his book is faith at work.

[10 : 42] Truth is not merely concerned with orthodoxy, believing the right things, but also orthopraxy, living the right way. It's entirely possible for a Christian to believe the right things, but to live the wrong way and in so doing, wander from the truth.

Or it's possible for someone to live the right way, but to believe the wrong things and so again to wander from the truth. For James, the truth isn't abstract.

It's the real life expression of our faith at work. So wandering from the faith isn't just about what you believe, but also the way you live. There may be some among us who are wandering from the truth. While they may say they still believe all that they've ever believed, their lives have wandered from the course of grace and godliness.

Tell me, is that you? It's not sugarcoated. Is your commitment to Christ fading into the background of your life?

[11 : 54] With other things assuming a greater importance to you? Are you wandering? wandering? Secondly, here we have also the wanderers.

The wanderers. What makes the kind of wandering of which James speaks so painful isn't that it's the wandering of an unknown stranger. Listen again to what he says.

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, among you, my brothers, among you, it's a family desertion.

It's the wandering of a fellow brother in Christ. Here's a Christian you've known for many years. You've been there for him before, and he's been there for you before.

Perhaps you've been close enough to each other to call each other brothers. The wanderers to whom James refers aren't unknown strangers. They are our spiritual brothers and sisters in Christ, fellow Christians.

[13 : 07] This is what makes spiritual wandering and desertion so ugly and distasteful. It is not merely a rejection of the truth. It is also a rejection of those who hold to the truth.

how much King David grieved over Saul's rejection of him. How much Jesus grieved over Judas' betrayal of him.

How much Paul smarted over Demas' desertion of him. I'm very blessed to enjoy a close relationship with my brothers, so I don't really know how much it hurts to be part of an estranged family where brothers don't speak with one another except except to argue and miscall each other. I call it the long kiss goodbye when someone from among us begins to fall off the scene. Perhaps they're not as regular as they used to be in worship.

They stop coming to the prayer meeting and they only sparingly and grudgingly engage in the tasks in the church they've agreed to do.

[14 : 23] The long kiss goodbye is painful not just to me but to all of us because we can tell that that person is cutting away the strings which held them to us in the first place.

They're severing the ties of their relationship to us. And I wonder whether we could replace James' saying in this verse with the words, my brothers, if someone from among you is giving you the long kiss goodbye.

Now we're not a cult so people are free to leave us and to join us. There's no brainwashing, there's no guilt tripping to be done, but with a family it hurts when a brother or sister wanders from the truth, goes astray from the pattern of sound teaching and life we have found in the gospel of Jesus Christ. That's what makes it so painful and so ugly, that those wandering from the truth come from among us. Even now, picture them in your mind's eye.

Remember the joy of having fellowship with them in Christ. Feel the grief of their loss and prayerfully ask yourself the question, how in my continuing relationship with them can I demonstrate the *semper fi* of the gospel?

[15 : 55] How can I reclaim this wounded Christian for Christ? Make no mistake, those who have wandered away from the faith are not to be envied, far less imitated.

They're to be pitied. they've been duped, they've been deceived. They're being led away into the wandering of ugliness and emptiness.

Secondly, this evening, the beautiful restoration of the spiritual wanderer. The beautiful restoration of the spiritual wanderer.

when God asked Cain where his brother was, Cain replied of Abel, am I my brother's keeper?

Indeed, that's been one of the questions Christians have asked down the years and continue to ask today.

Am I my brother's keeper? Am I responsible or accountable for the actions of others? us? Better thinkers than I have ever, I'll ever be, have puzzled over this question, but to be honest, it doesn't really seem to be much of a question for James.

[17 : 14] Because he sees it as our responsibility and duty as Christians to restore our wandering fellow Christians, to restore the family unit, and to preserve the integrity of the truth.

faith. We may not be accountable for the actions of others, not even responsible, but we all have a part to play in being our brother's keeper. Let me give you four reasons, very briefly, why it's important to engage with James' encouragement to restore wandering brothers and sisters in Christ to the fullness of gospel experience and expression.

First, it is needful. then it's life-giving, then it's wise, and then it's Christ-like. And again, I'm asking you, as I've asked you at every stage of this sermon this evening, picture someone in your mind's eye who has wandered from the truth, and then ask yourself, how can I go about attempting to restore them to the truth?

First of all, restoration is needful. needful. James writes, whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Is there anything more needful than this? That we save our brothers and sisters from death and cover over a multitude of sins? Now, I don't want to get into the implications of this verse for our reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.

[18 : 52] Rather, we want to take what James says at face value. The spiritual wanderer is staggering their way to death and their sins stand against them.

Their relationship with God is broke and as it stands without the intervention of other members of the fellowship, will never be restored. Lord. You will all know what a crystal is.

The most common example of a crystal is a grain of salt. What is really so common to us under the scope of an electron microscope is an incredibly intricate structure composed of precise layers and exact angles.

All crystals, especially salt, are prone to a design flaw called a point defect.

A point defect may consist of only a few molecules positioned in slightly the wrong place or at slightly the wrong angle.

[20 : 05] If left untreated, a point defect can grow and cause the whole crystal to break apart. In the same way, if left untreated, the plain teaching of the word of God is that spiritual wandering leads to spiritual death and eternity of condemnation under the infinite wrath of God.

Spiritual wandering begins with a point defect in our discipleship. earlier on, we called it the beginning of a long kiss goodbye.

Watch out for it. Are there point defects in your discipleship which are growing out of control? Or as you prayerfully look around our fellowship, do you notice that there are some among us who are spiritually wandering?

If you saw them walking in front of a bus on St. Vincent Street out there, you'd call out to them.

You'd race out to save them. In the same way, if you see that happening spiritually, intervene.

Don't wait for someone else to take the responsibility. Don't wait for me or for one of the elders to take the responsibility. Get involved.

[21 : 29] Gently remind them of the gospel of Jesus Christ by which they were saved and the grace on which they stand. There is a lot at stake in the restoration. So James says in essence, be your brothers, keep it in this.

Second reason why it's so important that we engage in this ministry of restoration. It's life giving. It's life giving. You know, every generation of the church has its buzzword.

This generation's buzzword is missional. missional. Every church must be missional. That is to say evangelistic in its outlook. Now I wasn't aware that the church had ever really stopped being missional and I'm sometimes deeply suspicious of new words being introduced into the Christian vocabulary.

But in this case I think we get the point of missional. Churches must not be introverted and uber conservative. They must be extroverted and entrepreneurial.

Not merely holding on to what we have but reaching out to win new territory for Jesus. However, I sometimes wonder whether in the busyness of the missional church the importance of the ministry of restoration has been de-emphasized somewhat.

[22 : 55] We should not merely be reaching out to the enemies of the church. We should also be healing our own wounded of whom there are very many.

As I look back on my days in FCYA, Free Church Youth Association in Aberdeen, Fiona and Ross will remember this, without thinking too hard I can count 20 of my Christian friends from the Free

Church in Aberdeen who have since wandered from the truth.

Tell me, well you won't be able to tell me, only I'll be able to tell myself, have I spent as much time in attempting their restoration as I have in trying to win new people for the kingdom of Christ?

Christ. The thing is that by definition, as we restore the wanderer and bring them back to the orthodoxy of faith in Christ, we're giving them new life.

When was the last time you consciously said to yourself concerning someone from this fellowship who has fallen away, and there are many? Semper Fi. Maybe we shouldn't just have missions to reach out to new people who have never heard the gospel before, but missions also to those who have, and for a while seem to be walking in the truth, but since then have wandered.

[24 : 27] Don't we realize the life that we could give them? If in the daringness of the grace of God, we should reach out and restore them to Jesus.

Thirdly, the ministry of restoration is wise. Is wise. You'll know that the book of James, I've said this often, is the New Testament equivalent of the book of Proverbs.

It's New Testament wisdom literature. This is how we are to live as Christians if we want to be wise. James has already spoken of how we gain wisdom from God by prayer, and how that wisdom from above glues a church together in unity, resolving conflict, and demonstrating love.

And now at the very end of his letter, he wants to commend the wisdom of restoring wandering brothers and sisters to the church of Christ. this is true Christian wisdom.

Not that we shoot our wounded, but that at considerable risk to ourselves, we go out into no man's land and carry our fallen wounded back into the safety of our trenches.

[25 : 48] One of our older adherents, who has now passed into glory, told me about her dad. her dad had been a boy when enlisted into the British army and sent to France in World War I.

Advancing from a trench into no man's land, he'd been shot in the leg by a German sniper. He was just a boy. He lay crying out in no man's land.

He couldn't move. At that point, a friend of his from a nearby village in the north saw his pal lying on the ground and he picked him up and he put him over his shoulder and he carried him back into the Allied trenches.

For the rest of his life, this lady's father, I think they were from North Uist, enjoyed the closest friendship with his rescuer who was from the next village.

And the words he said were these words, how can you repay a man for putting you over his shoulder, carrying you back to safety and saving your life?

[27 : 01] How can you repay a man for putting you over his shoulder, carrying you to safety and saving your life? How true. Are any among us wise enough to see our wounded brothers and sisters in Christ and pick them up and put them over our shoulders and carry them back to Jesus?

I know that some of us are really very good at it. But according to James, it's something we all must strive toward. And so even now, in your mind's eye, as you fill your heart with Semper Fi, always be loyal.

think of someone you know who is lying wounded in no man's land and start praying for their restoration.

That's wisdom. And then lastly, the ministry of restoration is Christ-like. Christ-like.

Finally, as we close not just the study in these verses, but studies in the whole book of James, the restoration of the spiritual wanderer to the truth of the gospel isn't only just needful and life-giving and wise, it's Christ-like.

[28 : 21] How like Christ to leave the 99 sheep in the pen and go looking for the one sheep which has wandered off. How like him to restore a pathetic Peter.

How like Jesus to be so patient with his unbelieving brother James, who until the resurrection refused to believe in Jesus as Lord. If ever there was one who put his faith to work, it was Jesus. Jesus, the model from whom James is painting this letter he has written to the early church. How much Jesus loved us. And that he was willing to search for us when we were wandering and bring him home to himself.

If ever there was someone who believed and lived Semper Fi, it was our Savior Jesus Christ.

Christ. However painful it might be for someone from among us to wander from the truth, we are our brother's keeper in this.

We have a responsibility to make every effort to restore them to the truth of the gospel. And let's have confidence.

[29 : 42] If the grace of Christ is sufficient for us to go out looking for them in the first place, the grace of Christ is more than sufficient to bring them back to him.

Let us pray. It's a very sobering thought in our minds, Lord, that there may be a point defect in us that if left unattended and unhealed may lead to us wandering from the truth.

And so, Lord, we apply the words of King David in Psalm 139. Search me. Know my anxious thoughts.

Lead me in the way everlasting. And it's perhaps just as sobering a thought to have in the eyes of our minds those who once sat amongst us and called us their brothers and sisters, those we loved, those who were there for us and we were there for them and yet now they've wandered from the truth.

And Father, we pray that you would give us a heart to engage in the ministry of restoration. Though they may have hurt us and though it may be hard to go find them again, though we may have to overcome our inward bias, yet, O Lord, we pray that you would give us the grace of Christ to leave the 99 behind and go looking for that one sheep.

[31 : 28] For if your grace is enough for us to go looking for them, then it's more than enough for you to bring them home. We ask these things in Jesus' name.

Amen. I think we'll engage in our prayer of intercession now. We'll finish with the psalm. We'll engage in our prayer of intercession.

Let's pray. Our God and Father, we give you thanks for our time here this evening. If ever there was a people who wandered from you, it was the Jews.

It is the Jews. The most hated nation on the face of planet Earth. Hated by their neighbors. Hated historically.

And yet loved, dearly loved by you. Lord, will you not reach out and return them to yourself? Will you not prick their hearts and bring them to a new knowledge of your love for them in Christ Jesus, our Lord, and theirs?

[32 : 37] We pray for the work of international mission to Jewish people. And all they do, all their missionaries, every contact they have with Jewish people. Bless every conversation that's had.

Bless every work that's done in the name of Jesus. Bless those Jewish people who, even during lockdown, have come to a living faith in Christ Jesus as their Messiah.

Lord, we pray your blessing upon our missionary friends. We remember Katrina. We remember Dr. Adam. We remember Suraj.

And Sashko. And so many others. We remember this evening Patrick Jock. We thank you so much for his time with us.

Oh, Lord, our God, bless the efforts of these believers. Lord, we thank you that you caused us to be partners in the gospel with you.

[33 : 41] what a privilege it is. Father, we pray for our children. We ask and pray, Lord, for them that you would give them a heart for the gospel.

They live in an awkward and difficult world, a world which is removed from them the boundary of right and wrong. Lord, we ask and pray that you would help us to be faithful, to do everything we can to point them to Jesus, us, and then leave them in your hands, knowing that your hands are more faithful and loving than ours will ever be.

Father, we pray for any who are stubborn and who don't understand. We thank you the importance, the important strength of the relationship isn't their grip on you, but your grip on them, and that on the day of their baptism, you promised to be their God, to bless them and to bring them to yourself. Well, in our vision and in our sight and in our day, bring them to yourself, oh Lord, we ask. We remember the work of Phil and Wendy and Duncan and Lydia in Hope Community Church in Helensboro.

Lord, we thank you for blessing that work. And we ask and pray that as the days roll on toward Duncan and Lydia coming among them, there be a sense of anticipation that you're going to do a great thing in Helensboro.

[35 : 15] We thank you once again, Lord, that we have been called upon to give of our best, to send them out to plant this new church. What a privilege it is to give more than ever to get.

Lord, we ask for ourselves as a church with the changing legislation every week on what we are and what we are not allowed to do. We pray that you would give us patience but also wisdom and skill to know when to do and when not to do.

In particular, we remember what we find so hard about coming together to worship, these things we find so difficult, things like having to wear masks and things like not singing.

We find these things so hard having to distance from one another. Lord, we thank you for those in authority over us and for their good will but we long for the day when these things shall be a thing of the past.

And Heavenly Father, we pray for ourselves in our search for a new building. Lord, our desire for this isn't selfish. It is that we may find a new fishing boat for where to fish for the souls of Glasgow's peoples.

[36 : 37] But also that this place would redound to your glory as it becomes the base of our worship. Open the door that you choose and close the doors that you don't choose.

Now we commit all these things to you in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.