



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Background: Thematic Cohesiveness in James 1

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As previously [noted](#), at first glance, James 1.2-27 appears to be a random collection of short reflections on multiple topics. But when we read the chapter more closely, we notice repetitions that indicate the different sections are connected.

Repeated Themes

James's affinity for using synonymous terms and phrases is immediately evident when we put verses 2-4 alongside 12-15 and see the common themes of *trials*, *testing*, and *endurance*. We also see that, in some sense at least, the treatment of trials and temptations in verses 13-15 adds detail to the broad strokes painted in verses 2-4. This is more evident when we notice that the verbal form of the word translated "trials" (πειρασμός; *peirasmos*) in verses 2 and 12 is translated "tempt[ed]" (πειράζω; *peirazō*) in verses 13-14.

We see similar repetition and expansion of other ideas. Verses 3 and 4 use different forms of ἔργον (*ergon*), "work," to refer to the kind of faith that *produces* endurance and lets endurance have a perfect *effect* in one's life. A synonymous idea is expressed in verse 12 when James writes that the one who "has stood the test" will be rewarded with "the crown of life."

There are also connections in the chapter involving the words “perfect,” “steadfastness,” “blessing,” and “work.” (1) “Perfect” (τέλειος; *teleios*) is used in verse 4 to describe the effect steadfastness should have, in verse 17 to refer to the quality of gifts that come down from the Father, and in verse 25 to describe the law of liberty upon which one is to focus as a doer of the word. (2) In what amounts to a synonym of “steadfastness” (ὑπομονή; *hypomonē*) in verses 2-4, verse 25 speaks of the necessity of fixing one’s attention on the law in order to “persevere” (παρὰμένω; *paramenō*; KJV/NKJV/NIV have “continues”; NASB has “abides”). (3) Verses 12 and 25 say that being “blessed” (μακάριος; *makarios*) is the reward for enduring trials and staying focused on the law. (4) In addition to repeating the word for “work” (*ergon*) in verses 4 and 25, the synonymous word, “doer” (ποιητής; *poiētēs*) is repeated in verses 22-23, 25.

The theme that emerges from these repetitions is that the life that pleases God is one that is demonstrated in complete and consistent loyalty of faith. Other emphases in the chapter illustrate how and how not to practice this enduring faith. Positively, (1) James commends steadfastness for the sake of God and righteousness, even as we face trials (vv. 2-4, 19-25; see 4.4-8); in doing so, he points to a lifestyle that (2) depends only on God for direction and blessing (vv. 5, 17-18). Negatively, he names two things we should avoid: (1) wavering between loyalty and disloyalty, an attitude of indecision that results from having a wrong view of God (vv. 6-7, 16); and (2) being of two minds where commitment is concerned. This double-mindedness is demonstrated in the temptations (1) to be overly infatuated with things that do not last and (2) to give in to evil desires (vv. 9-10, 13-15).

In introducing these ideas in chapter 1, James sets the stage for major themes in the letter: (1) how we treat people, especially those whom society devalues (2.1-17; 5.1-6); (2) how we relate to our fellow believers and what motivates our interactions (3.1 - 4.12); (3) our priorities generally (4.13 - 5.6); and (4) whether we will remain patient as we await the Lord’s coming (5.7-11). The way we put James’s teaching into practice will demonstrate the level of our steadfastness in being God’s friends (4.4).

Structural Considerations

It’s apparent, then, that chapter 1 is not the structureless collection of sayings some have suggested. But what is the nature of the structure James employed?

Peter Davids proposes that James 1.2-27 comprise a “double opening statement.”

The first segment introduces the themes of testing, wisdom, and wealth (1:2-11). The second segment recapitulates these themes in terms of testing, speech, and generosity/doing (1:12-25), with a summary and transition statement (1:26-27) (Davids 1982, 25).

Dan McCartney finds Davids's outline to be "forced," and says that "his application of the 'double-opening' (addressed in the body in reversed order) appears somewhat manipulated to fit his theory." But he does think Davids "has hit upon the general path to a solution to understanding James's structure." He refers to other studies that have shown the character of the letter to be more Jewish than Hellenistic, "identifying the Shema as a unifying thematic principle in the epistle" (McCartney 2009, 62). He agrees with writers such Luke Timothy Johnson and Richard Bauckham who see chapter 1 as

a kind of *précis*¹ or "epitome" that summarily presents the themes of the letter, though not in a straight line but cyclically and from a variety of angles. Also, the "double opening," though perhaps not quite as neat as Davids drew it, does appear in principle to be operating: the several themes of the body of the letter are introduced and reintroduced. Then James 2:1-5:6 presents a series of admonitions that tend to focus on one of these issues while relating some of the other issues to that central one. The end of the letter, 5:7-20, in echo of chapter 1, draws a few remaining things together and to a close, focusing primarily on patience and intercessory prayer (McCartney 2009, 63).

Robert Wall takes a slightly different approach, seeing all of 1.19-27 as a transition passage, with verse 19 setting out the major themes for the rest of the writing: (1) quick to hear (1.22 – 2.26); (2) slow to speak (3.1-18); and (3) slow to anger (4.1-5.6) (Wall 1997a, 34-38; also Wall 1997b, 557-559).

Like all efforts to outline James, Wall's solution is not without problems. But it does present us with an approach to the letter that I think has merit. Because of the traditional association of orphans and widows with the poor (cf. Isa 10.2; Zech 7.10), I would suggest that 1.26-27 fit better thematically with 2.1-13 than with 1.19-25. And we can discern a common theme in the successive passages where James challenges people who claim one thing while doing something else relative to professing belief in the word (1.22-25), practicing true religion (1.26-27), caring for the poor (2.1-13), and having true faith (2.14-26).

Whatever we conclude about the nature of James's structure, as we explore the distinct passages in chapter 1, we will appreciate them more if we keep in mind that James likely intended some thematic connection between them.

Works Cited

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¹ "A concise summary of essential points, statements, or facts." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. "précis," accessed January 31, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pr%C3%A9cis>.

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