



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

On Course for Victory

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One of the most riveting images from the modern Olympics resulted from the determination of Swiss marathoner Gabriele Andersen-Scheiss in the 1984 Los Angeles games. Suffering from heat exhaustion, she entered the stadium fifteen minutes after the winner. According to one account,

The crowd gasped in horror as [she] staggered onto the track, her torso twisted, her right arm straight and her left arm limp, her right knee strangely stiff. She waved away medical personnel who rushed to help her knowing that, if they touched her, she ... would be disqualified. For nearly six minutes Andersen-Scheiss hobbled around the track, occasionally stopping and holding her head. Doctors watched her carefully and determined she was in no immediate danger. She collapsed over the finish line in thirty-seventh place into the arms of waiting medics. Fortunately, Andersen-Scheiss recovered quickly. Her time of 2:48:45 would have won the gold medal in the first five Olympic marathons (Lovett, *Marathon*).

Andersen-Scheiss's perseverance illustrates the steadfast attitude and determination to reach the finish line that James encouraged in James 1.2-4. Verses 6-12 show what is required to persevere.

Committed without Reservation (1.6-8)

In a mirror image of God’s gift of wisdom without reservation (see discussion of Jas 1.5 [here](#)), James says that having steadfast faith that lives by the wisdom of the God who gives without reservation requires a commitment that is equally unreserved (1.6-8).

It begins with unwavering trust that seeks God’s wisdom by asking “in faith, with no doubting” (v. 6a). The verb, “doubt” (διακρίνω; *diakrinō*) is a compound word from the verb “to judge” and the preposition “through.” In various NT texts, it means to doubt or to be divided within oneself. For example, in Matthew 21.21, Jesus used it to assure his disciples that if they “have faith and do not *doubt*” they too would do amazing things like cause a fig tree to wither or send a mountain into the sea. But in Acts 10.20, it is used when God tells Peter to go with Cornelius’s messengers “without *hesitation*.” Paul used it similarly in Romans 4.20 to remind his readers that “no unbelief made [Abraham] *waver* concerning the promise of God”—even though there were times when he wondered what God was doing and if there was not a better way (cf. Gen 15.2-3; 17.15-19; 18.22-33).

From these examples, we learn that *diakrinō*, like the English word “doubt,” has more than one meaning. The English word “doubt” can mean either:

- (1) “to call into question the truth of : to be uncertain or in doubt about (he *doubts* everyone’s word);
- (2) “to lack confidence in, distrust (... find myself *doubting* him even when I know he is honest ...);
- (3) “to consider unlikely (I *doubt* if I can go)” (“Doubt,” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*).

It is worth noting that James complimented his readers’ belief in God as something they had done well (Jas 2.19), an indication that his warning against doubt in 1.6 need not refer to the kind of intellectual doubts characteristic of the modern agnostic or atheist, or even the questions of believers who have periodic uncertainties about God and his ways. It is reasonable then to suggest that, in 1.6, he is urging those who have professed faith not to *waver* in their commitment, even when trials threaten their motivation to persevere.

Verses 6b-8 corroborate this conclusion. The tested person who seeks God’s wisdom must not be “like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind” (v. 6), for “a wave is passive, susceptible to change and manipulation, ... always shifting, never solid, never sure of what it is” (McCartney 2009, 90). James says such a person is “a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways” (v. 8). “Double-minded” (δίψυχος; *dipsychos*) means “indecisive, wavering” (Danker 2009, 99); “unstable” (ἀκατάστατος; *akatastatos*) refers to people who are restless or vacillating

(Bauer 2000, 35); they are unsettled, or fickle (McCartney 2009, 92). James says that such a person “must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord” (v. 7), including wisdom. Unlike God, he demonstrates reservation in his determination to endure. He remains on the fence, unwilling to go all in with complete trust in God. Like a wave repeatedly coming and going, he vacillates between God and the world (Jas 4.4).

It's About Attitude (1.9-11)

Although it first seems that James has shifted to a different topic, verses 9-11 are in fact continuing his emphasis on trials, zeroing in on the specific test of steadfastness that comes from the handling of material resources. As McCartney and others observe, while James certainly denounces deceitful and oppressive practices of the wealthy elsewhere in the letter, “the main problem here is not wealth per se but certain attitudes toward wealth, both on the part of the wealthy themselves and on the part of those who would pander to them” (McCartney 2009, 95). This is evident in James’s omission of the word “poor” in verses 9-11 (compare the four uses of *πτωχός*, *ptōchos* in 2.2-6); instead, he uses the word “lowly” (*ταπεινός*; *tapeinos*; v. 9) and its cognate, “humiliation” (*ταπείνωσις*; *tapeinōsis*; v. 10). There is nothing virtuous per se in being poor; while the poor might be more inclined to depend on God because they have nothing else, they can trust in the prospect of gaining wealth as surely as the rich can trust in the wealth they have.¹ Having wealth can threaten steadfast faith because it presents more opportunities for this-worldly goods and goals to distract from ultimate concerns (see Luke 12.13-21; 18.18-30; 1 Tim 6.17; 1 John 2.15-17; also, in view of James’s reference to boasting, see Jer 9.23-24).

James’s figure illustrates the ultimate humiliation that results from this false trust. Echoing Isaiah 40.6-8, he writes, “because like a flower of the grass [the rich] will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits” (vv. 10b-11a). His point is that all who submit in humility—whether poor or rich—must remain single-mindedly dependent on God and unwavering in steadfastness.

Press on to the Goal (1.12)

Having underscored the need to depend on God, James concludes his treatment of trials in verse 12 by emphasizing the promise of reward for all who remain steadfast (note the repetition of

¹ Prov 30.8-9 warns of the pitfalls of both: ⁸ “Remove far from me falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, ⁹ lest I be full and deny you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God.”

πειρασμός, *peirasmos* -“trials”; δόκιμος, *dokimos* – “test”; and ὑπομονή, *hypomonē* – “steadfastness” in vv. 2-4, 12).

The person who remains “steadfast under trial” will be “blessed” (μακάριος; *makarios*). Though it has become common to translate *makarios* as “happy” (e.g., NET), the word has a depth of meaning that goes beyond the emotional state most today associate with “happiness.” *Makarios* refers to the state of relationship with God in which we experience wholeness (see McCartney 2009, 100). Thus, comments like Moo’s need to be repeated often:

The tendency to translate with the word “happy” is a misguided effort to avoid unclear “religious” language and should be resisted. A person who is “blessed” may not be “happy” at all. For our emotional state may and will vary with the circumstances of life, but we can be assured that, whatever those circumstances, if we endure them with faith and commitment to God, we will be recipients of God’s favor” (Moo 2000, 69-70). (For a helpful discussion of problems with modern views of happiness, see Lewis 1970, 317-322.)

The ultimate blessing for all who “remain steadfast under trial” is reception of “the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.” “Crown” here is not the jeweled crown associated with royalty, the διάδημα (*diadēma*; used in the NT only in Rev 12.3; 13.1; 19.12). It is στέφανος (*stephanos*), the victory wreath awarded in the ancient games (cf. 1 Cor 9.24-25; Phil 4.1; 1 Thess 2.19; 2 Tim 4.8; Rev 2.10; 4.4, 10; etc.). That crown’s connection with victory, representative of a trained and disciplined athlete, fits James’s endurance theme in vv. 2-12 (Moo 2000, 70). Its association with “life” (ζωή; *zōē*) could be intended to convey the meaning, “living crown,” in contrast to the dying and transitory wreaths awarded in the games. Or the phrase may be intended to emphasize that the reward is salvation itself, “the crown that is life” (Davids 1982, 80).

Verse 12 thus culminates James’s introductory call to persevere when facing trials by emphasizing that if we stay on course, we will be rewarded according to God’s promise.

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