



# OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

## God's Desire, and Grace, for His People

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As noted [previously](#), differences in the translations of James 4.5 alert us to the difficulty of interpreting the verse, one of the most challenging in the New Testament (Moo 2000, 188):

**ESV:** Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? (cf. NIV 2011, NRSV, NLT)

**NASB:** Or do you think that the Scripture says to no purpose, “He jealously desires the Spirit whom He has made to dwell in us”?

**NIV 1984:** Or do you think Scripture says without reason that the spirit he caused to live in us envies intensely? (cf. ASV, NKJV, NET, CSB)

**Holman CSB:** Or do you think it's without reason the Scripture says that the Spirit who lives in us yearns jealously?

In part one, we utilized Dan McCartney's analysis of verse 5 to survey the ambiguities, issues that need to be resolved, and possible options for interpretation (McCartney 2009, 210–213). Here, we will more closely examine the most significant questions and offer an interpretation that we believe best explains the verse in the context of verses 4–6.

But first, consider a caveat to keep in mind as we study: “No interpretation [of v. 5] is free from problems, so preachers and teachers should beware of making any major point in a message dependent on the unique form of any one of the approaches to vv. 5–6a presented here (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 192).

## Who “Yearns Jealously”, and for What?

In the Greek text, the sentence the ESV translates, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us” contains three ambiguities (Moo 2000, 188–189). First, is the neuter noun πνεῦμα (*pneuma*), “spirit,” the subject of the sentence or its object? If the subject, does it refer to the human spirit or the divine Spirit? Or is “S/spirit” the object of God’s desire for loyalty? Second, does φθόνος (*phthonos*), “jealously” in the ESV, refer to human envy or the jealousy of God for his people? Third, as used with the preposition πρὸς (*pros*), does ἐπιποθέω (*epipothēō*), “yearns” in the ESV, refer to a person who *tends toward* human envy or is it used in an adverbial sense to refer to God acting *in a jealous manner*?

Determining what James means by φθόνον ἐπιποθεῖ (*phthonon epipothēi*) is complicated by the way the words are used elsewhere. In every other instance where it appears in the New Testament, *phthonos* has the negative connotation of “envy” and is not used to refer to God (cf. Matt 27.18 = Mark 15.10; Rom 1.29; Gal 5.21; Phil 1.15 1 Tim 6.4; Tit 3.3; 1 Pet 2.1). In contrast, in biblical Greek, *epipothēō* always has a positive meaning, but, like *phthonos*, is not used elsewhere to refer to God (cf. Rom 1.11; 2 Cor 5.2; 9.14; Phil 1.8; 2.26; 1 Thess 3.6; 2 Tim 1.4; 1 Pet 2.2). “The exegetical details therefore point in opposite directions” (Moo 2000, 189).

## What “Scripture”?

Regarding James’s reference to “the Scripture” (ἡ γραφή, *hē graphē*), there is no known text, whether canonical or extrabiblical, that says exactly what James wrote. Various authors have proposed or summarized different possibilities for James’s meaning; they include the following.

First, James cited an apocryphal source that is unknown to us; a translation other than the LXX; or a paraphrase from Jewish interpretation literature (Davids 1982, 162).

Second, he used a source that garbled a text that has the lexical elements of James 4.5, but meant something different (McCartney 2008, 215).

Third, because his other Scripture citations are quotations of specific texts (cf. *graphē* again in 2.23; and the citations in 2.11 and 4.6), Laws argues that “we should expect that a solution . . . would lie in reference to a specific passage in the LXX.” She thus proposes that he was citing either Psalm 84.2 or 42.1 (in both texts, the LXX uses *epipothēō*) (Laws 1974, 212).

Fourth, Johnson suggests that the verb “says” (λέγει, *legei*) was intended to point ahead to the quotation of Proverbs 3.34 in verse 6 (Johnson 1985, 280).

Fifth, James was paraphrasing the principle expressed in Exodus 20.5: “I the LORD your God am a jealous [LXX ζηλωτής, *zēlōtēs*] God” (cf. UBS note; Exod 34.14; Zech 8.2) (Blomberg and Kamell 2009; 190; McCartney 2008, 215; Moo 2000, 191). This is the most natural way to take verse 5’s reference to “Scripture” in the point James makes in verses 4–5.

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## What Was James Saying?

As we seek an interpretative solution, we concur with Moo who wrote that, “since ... the exegetical data of the verse are not conclusive, context becomes a key deciding factor” (Moo 2000, 190). While true that, in 4.1–3, James says that the cause of the fights and quarrels that were afflicting the community was to be found in their unchecked passions [envy] (cf. 3.14, 16), in verse 4, he turns to the matter of their friendship with the world. As we previously [studied](#), his use of the Old Testament prophetic “adulteress” imagery to designate those who broke covenant with God suggests the related ideas that God was jealous for his people, would not countenance their unfaithfulness, and considered them his enemies (v. 4). Thus, the translation in the ESV (and others, see above) that sees “God” in verse 4 as the antecedent of “he” in verse 5 is contextually sound and serves to advance the exhortation developed in verses 4–6. Because of his divine jealousy, God yearns for the spirit he made to dwell in us and is distressed when we choose friendship with the world instead of him.

This means that, just as it is used elsewhere, *epipitheō* is used positively in James 4.5 with the verse being the only biblical reference that uses the word to refer to “God.” It also means that, unlike other biblical references, *phthonos* is also used positively here. But that is not implausible, for while it is not characteristic of biblical literature, “*phthonos* was occasionally used by Greek writers of the jealousy of the Olympian gods” (Moo 2000, 190). Furthermore, *phthonos* and *zēlos*, the word often used in the LXX to refer to God’s jealousy (cf. Exod 20.5), were sometimes used interchangeably in the Jewish literature that was well known in James’s world (cf. 1 Macc 8.16; *T. Simeon* 4.5; *T. Gad* 7.2, 4). Thus, while unusual, “James’s use of *phthonos* with respect to God’s desire for his people is not impossible” (Moo 2000, 190).

The same contextual considerations justify the ESV’s lower-case punctuation of “spirit.” It’s not inconceivable, of course, that James would refer to the Holy Spirit. But it is noteworthy that nowhere else in his letter does he do so, though some have posited that his use of “wisdom” functions similarly to the way Paul uses “Spirit” and his Jewish environment frequently spoke of God’s Spirit as the source and culmination of wisdom (cf. Isa 11.2; Dan 5.14; Wisdom 7.7; Sirach 39.6; Acts 6.3, 10) (McCartney 2009, 214). But the context of James 4.4–5 supports the conclusion that what James had in mind was God’s desire for his human subjects, who are uniquely possessive of the spirit that God caused to dwell in them, to remain loyal. Or, to utilize the words that follow his second-commandment declaration that he is a “jealous God,” his desire remains that those who were once his friends will again come to “love [him] and keep [his] commandments” (Exod 20.5–6).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Although I lack the space here to adequately discuss it, I will call attention to the attractive suggestion by McCartney that the reference to the “S/spirit he caused to dwell in us” is not a reference to the Holy Spirit, but refers to “the presence of God in divinely given wisdom and understanding, or what the OT called the ‘spirit of wisdom’ with which the Messiah was to be anointed (Isa. 11:2) but that had already been given to leaders such as Joshua (Deut. 34:9) and even artisans such as Bezalel (Exod. 35:31).” See his elaboration in McCartney 2009, 214–215.

## What If We Should Fail?

In contrast to the warning and implicit appeal to yield to God's desire in verses 4–5, verse 6 reassures us that failure need not be fatal. To believers who have adulterated the relationship and become friends of the world, it remains true that “God gives more grace” (μείζονα, *meizona*, “more” is emphatic at the beginning of the sentence). This reassurance also has a scriptural basis, found in Proverbs 3.34 (LXX): “Therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble’” (v. 6). But, as verses 7–10 show, this is a conditional gift, accessible to those who submit and draw near to God, resist the devil, and renounce their double-minded outlook in favor of single-minded friendship with their creator.

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### Additional Thoughts on James

“The key verse for understanding the Book of James is 2:22, whose significance can be grasped only if translated quite literally. Speaking of Abraham’s offering of Isaac, James declares, ‘You see that faith was co-acting (or “co-working”) his deeds (*ergois*), and faith was brought to completion out of his deeds (*ergon*).’ Faith never becomes something else. It is perfected in the deeds it performs. And that point for James is not soteriological but intensely moral.”

~ Luke Timothy Johnson. 2004. “An Introduction to the Letter of James.” *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God: Studies in the Letter of James*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 31

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