



OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

When a Christian Wanders

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About halfway through a sixteen-year tenure with one congregation I served, a brother moved into the area who, after a time, was ordained as one of our elders. Among the memories of my association with him was an exhortation to the shepherds and ministers that he repeated in numerous meetings, usually when we were discussing congregational growth. Again and again, he urged us to make sure we were expending the effort to “keep the saved saved.” His concern was warranted, as Blomberg and Kamell explain:

Helping bring back wayward Christians securely into the “fold” may constitute one of the most neglected responsibilities of the church today. One thinks of God’s heart for such “little ones,” as disclosed in Matthew’s account of the parable of the lost sheep (Mt 18:10–14). Many churches, particularly growing ones, count only the number of visitors, new members, converts, those baptized, and so on, but never notice how many disappear out “the back door” (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 252).

When we look more closely at Matthew 18.10–14, we notice that it makes a different point than the similarly worded passage in Luke 15.3–7. Both texts use the figure of one sheep out of a hundred that becomes separated from the ninety-nine who are secure. But, while the point in Luke is to defend outreach to “the tax collectors and sinners” the Pharisees and scribes deemed unworthy of kingdom entrance (Luke 15.1–2), in Matthew the analogy appears in a context where the emphasis is on not causing others to stumble and fall away. Both writers report that Jesus referred to the “lost” (ἀπόλλυμι, *apollymi*)—Luke in the middle of the story and Matthew at its end (three

times in Luke 15.4, 6; once in Matt 18.14). But, in contrast to Luke, Matthew's account emphasizes those who had "gone astray" (*πλανάω*, *planaō*), that is, those who had "wandered off" (NIV) from the flock (three times in Matt 18.12–13).

In what amounts to his final echo of Matthew's gospel (for discussion, see [issue 1/16](#)), James is also concerned with believers who wander. Since it is the last thing he says in the letter, his exhortation is especially significant.

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders [*πλανηθῆ*, *planēthē*] from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering [*πλάνης*, *planēs*] will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins (Jas 5.19–20).

The Context

Understood broadly, the idea of not wandering from the truth encompasses a range of concerns, and we are wise to study the relevant NT texts where they are expressed. But our focus here is on James 5.19–20, and we need to study those verses in the context of this letter. From the beginning, James has given attention to trials, not so much because of the trials themselves, but because of the way they can threaten spiritual maturity (1.2–4). Immediately after introducing the subject of trials, he calls for unwavering faith (1.5–7) that resists the lure of temptation (1.12–15). As he proceeds through the letter, he alludes to specific temptations, including immorality (1.26–27), favoritism (2.1–7), profession without practice (2.14–17), losing control of the tongue (3.1–12), quarreling over selfish desires (4.1–3), too much trust in our ability to control circumstances (4.13–5.6), and yielding to pressure from oppressors (5.7–11). He is uncompromising in his appeal for loyalty to God, employing "more imperative verbs per word ... than in any other NT book" (Moo 2000, 249). For James, the commitment of faith is an absolute either-or: "Submit ... to God. Resist the devil" (4.7).

But he also sees the practice of faith as a community matter, not just a personal one (cf. especially 5.16). So, it is fitting that he closes his appeal for absolute loyalty and a commensurate lifestyle with a call for the community ("my brothers," v. 19) to join together to help every person be unwavering in faith, even those who have wandered from the truth.

The Situation

Verse 19 envisions the circumstance that requires the commanded action. It is conditional in nature, the particle *if* (*ἐάν*, *ean*) used with the subjunctive verbs, *wanders* (*πλανηθῆ*, *planēthē*) and *brings back* (*ἐπιστρέψῃ*, *epistrepsē*). James envisions a problem that could develop, not necessarily one that had already presented itself.

Louw and Nida include the Greek verb *πλανάομαι* (*planaomai*, "wanders") in the "Linear Movement" domain where they define it, "to move about, without definite destination or particular purpose — 'to wander about.'" As an example of that meaning, they cite Hebrews 11.38: "ἐπὶ ἐρημίαις πλανώμενοι καὶ ὄρεσιν [*epi epēmiais planōmenoi kai oresin*] 'they wandered in the deserts and hills'" (Louw and Nida 1989, 185). Our English word planet has its origins in *planaomai*, so designated "because a planet does not appear fixed in the sky as a star, but 'wan-

ders' (or 'strays') through the night sky" (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 248). Louw and Nida also include the word in the "Hold a View, Believe, Trust" domain, noting that it refers to someone who no longer believes what is true (citing Jas 5.19; 1 Tim 6.10) (Louw and Nida 1989, 374). In terms of voice, its use in verse 19 may be passive, referring to one who is being led astray (see the verb's other appearance in 1.16), or an implied middle voice, used to indicate that the person has wandered of his own accord. Both are possible, and James may have intended some ambiguity (cf. Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 248 n. 48).

The wandering is "from the truth" (ἀπὸ τῆς ἀληθείας, *apo tēs alētheias*), a word that in biblical use includes a propositional aspect, i.e., something that can be known, but also the expectation of doing and obedience (e.g., Gal 5.7; 1 John 1.6; cf. Ps 51.6) (see Moo 2000, 249; McCartney 2009, 263; Barclay 1976, 154–155). That James was concerned about conformity to the truth is not surprising. He previously warned against bitter jealousy, selfish ambition, and boasting that can lead a believer to be "false to the truth" (3.14). More importantly, in 1.18, he equates *alētheia* with "the word" (λόγος, *logos*) by which God brought us forth to new life. As the subsequent verses show, in James's understanding, the "word" (= truth) is the standard to which believers are to conform if they will successfully remain unwavering in their faith (1.19–25; cf. *logos* in vv. 21–23).

The appropriate response when a believe is found to have wandered is for "someone"—the pronoun *τις* (*tis*) is indefinite—to "bring him back" (ἐπιστρέφω, *epistrephō*). *Epistrephō*, "to turn back," is an important word in Christian preaching, used several times to refer to the initial turn from sin to God, the completion of the process begun with a changed mind (cf. Acts 3.19; 11.21; 14.15; 15.19; 26.18, 20; 28.27; 1 Thess 1.9). In James, it refers to a Christian who is brought back to a life of unwavering faith by his concerned faith community (note the plural pronoun phrase, ἐν ὑμῖν [*en humin*], "among you").

As James saw it, the goal of restoring the wanderer will be realized when the community understands the danger presented by the brother's wandering and acts to rescue him from death and sin (v. 20). We will look more closely at those ideas in our subsequent study.

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An Additional Thought on James

“There are basically five aspects of Christianity represented by James in his letter that deserve particular attention....

“First, ... for James, Jesus is not simply a figure of the past but of the present....

“Second, the distinctive presence of Jesus within James’s composition is through the medium of his sayings....

“Third, James not only contains allusions to the sayings of Jesus, but the entire spirit of his discourse poses a sharp challenge to the *ethos* of the world, a challenge that echoes the ministry of Jesus as recounted by the Synoptic Gospels....

“Fourth, James nevertheless locates this [nonconformist] outlook not in individuals but in an intentional community....

“Fifth, James provides us a vision of early Christianity as a community of solidarity...”

~ Luke Timothy Johnson. 2004. *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God: Studies in the Letter of James*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 21–23

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