

Hebrews: Conclusion & James: Introduction

Shall we pray together?

Lord, our God, we know that it is good to quiet our hearts before You before we enter into a season in Your Word. We have been busy with many things, working all day, with scattered thoughts, but now we pray that our thoughts would turn to You. We pray that through our time together, we would come to understand better what true faith and true religion is. I pray, Lord, that we would hear Your voice calling us to the true faith that perseveres to the end, the true faith that takes the practical steps that make it possible to advance within the Christian community, to demonstrate that our religion is real by caring for widows and orphans in their distress, by being unstained by the world. These are parts of Your testimony to us, Lord, about what You would do in us. I pray that our hearts and our minds would be ready to receive Your very will for us. We ask that You would do this for Your name sake and that we might delight in Your presence. We ask this through Christ, Amen.

Last time, we were in Hebrews 11 and 12. We had just reached what is perhaps the climatic portion of the book of Hebrews, that climatic portion beginning in chapter 12:1-2. Just to remind you briefly, Hebrews 11 is what we sometimes call the “faith chapter,” and we saw that the unique perspective on the faith that Hebrews gives us is that the Christian faith is forward-looking. It is “eschatological,” if you will. It is a faith that acts upon a confidence in what God will do. The very end of chapter 11 prepares us for chapter 12 with the statement in verse 39 about the heroes of the faith: “These were all commended for their faith.” That word “commended” actually means “attested.” They were attested by God. God testified; He attested to them because of their faith, even though they did not receive what was promised. Verse 40 tells us, “God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.” So God attested to them, and then Hebrews 12:1-3 tell us that now God is going to use them as testifiers to God. God attested to them, as we read in 11:39, but now they are going to give their testimony to God. Listen to their role and the summary statement describing the central call to action in Hebrews 12:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning (or despising) its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinful men so that you will not grow weary or lose heart.

Perhaps a better translation might be, “So even though you grow weary, you will not lose heart.”

This passage that we have just read makes reference to the idea of athletic competition. Think about the Olympics. Perhaps when we look at those extremely fast Olympic runners, we think to ourselves, “I could never be an Olympic runner.” Even the times that are posted by the very slowest of the Olympic runners, make even the fastest of us here say, “They are much better than I.” Think about the Olympic marathoners. They run 26 consecutive miles at the rate of 5 minutes each. That is like sprinting for 26 miles. You think to yourself, “I could never do that.” However, Hebrews says that is exactly what you are doing. In fact, you are doing more. You are going to race, not for 26 miles, but the race that you must run with endurance is as long as life itself. That is why I asked earlier how many of you are tired, but happy. That is where we should be often. That is what Hebrews wants. It is not bad to be tired, as long as you still have enough to have joy in the running.

Here is the description of the race that a Christian runs, as Hebrews draws attention to what is really the central command of this entire section of the book: “Let us run with endurance.” That is the central command, really, of the entire book of Hebrews, and we can see how he develops this almost point-by-point or even almost word-by-word. He says, first of all, “Since we are surrounded by such a crowd of witnesses, let us run.” The Greek has it more like this: “Consequently we ourselves should run.” The very first word, practically, is “we.” We ourselves run. Who runs? We do. Every Christian runs. Every Christian is on a journey, the book of Hebrews says, every last one. We run surrounded by a crowd of witnesses. We run with people watching us run, and these witnesses are not spectators. It does not say that we run surrounded by a crowd of spectators. We run surrounded by a crowd of witnesses. That is to say, they are those who ran before and finished the race and reached Christ and reached heaven. They say, “Even as it is difficult for you to run now, so it was for me.” They say, “Even as I was attested by God, now I will testify to God, and say that by His grace you can run the race even to the end.” Those are the witnesses. To put it in Olympic terminology, the stadium is not filled by aficionados or fans of running. Everyone in the stadium is a runner. Every last one is a champion on par with those who are running on the stadium floor. They know what it means to run.

How do we run? We run, it says, laying aside (or throwing off) everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. You know that in the Olympics people use the minimal possible equipment. The skiers wear those very light tights even though it’s cold. In the Summer Olympics, they hold up the swimming suits that they wear and they say, “This swimming suit weighs $\frac{1}{4}$ of an ounce,” and you look at it and say, “I believe that.” When looking at their running gear, the total weight of their gear including their shoes might be seven ounces. They want to throw off everything they possibly can that would slow them down. We understand that about athletic competition, and in our race, we want to throw everything off too, but what is that? He specifies that it is the sin that entangles us—“that hangs around us,” it could be translated.

We notice that this “sin” is singular. He does not give us a list and specify five or six or seven sins that you have to watch out for. It means sin, generically. It is not necessarily great big, fat, hairy, ugly sins that bother us. It is little ones, too. It is public and private. It is sins that are acted out and those that are not acted out. Sin entangles us and makes it difficult for us to run. Sin generically must be put aside. He says then, “Let us run with endurance the race marked out for us.” Here again, we have an allusion to the way in which competition takes place. “The race marked out,” means we run within the course that has been set. In the winter games, you ski inside the gates. If you say, “I really don’t want to ski inside that gate,” the judges say, “That’s fine, you don’t have to,” but that is called disqualification. In the summer Olympics, you cannot say, “Well, you know, I am behind, so what if I just cut across the field a little bit and make up 70 or 80 yards?” Again, you can do that, but you will not win the prize. You will be disqualified. We have to run the race marked out for us. What he is alluding to here is our desire to avoid the path that God wants. What each of us really needs to do here is almost to fill in what we would think of and want to avoid. Is it a path marked by the death of a loved one in an untimely way, the loss of a job, a lack of income, a chronic illness, very difficult relationships, broken relationships? Whatever you can think of, small or great, he is saying, “Run the race that God marked out for you. Do not resist the course that He has. Fix your eyes on Jesus as you run. He is the author and the perfecter of our faith.” This has two sides to it. We could take apart the words one by one, but also the idea is that as you run in this difficult race with endurance, remember that your Lord Jesus ran this path before you. If you say, “Well I don’t really want to go down the course marked for me,” then remember that Jesus ran a course that He might not particularly have preferred. I will put it another way. He was not surprised by what happened at the end of His life. From the time of His incarnation, He knew to anticipate the physical pain, the social shame, and the spiritual anguish of crucifixion, of bearing our sins on the cross. That was the race marked out for Him; if He was willing to run it, then we should be as well. “Let us fix

our eyes on Jesus,” he says, and then he tells us who Jesus is one more time. He tells us first that Jesus is the champion, or the author, of our faith. Remember, we talked about that before. “Author of our faith,” means the trailblazer or the pioneer. That is a reminder of what we studied in chapter 2. Jesus does not say, “You go run.” He has cleared the path for us to run. He has blazed the trail. He has cleared the obstacles out of the trail—the chief obstacle, of course, being Satan who held us all in the power of the fear of death. He defeated Satan through His death on the cross, so we keep our eyes on Jesus the author of our faith. Now, he says, “The path is clear. You can run.”

That is not all, however. Jesus is also the perfecter of our faith. He is the one who takes us to completion for the race. He does not just say “Go run and I will watch you.” He does not say, “Go run and I will be at the end,” although that is true. He also empowers us to run as we go along. He does not even empower us simply by running alongside us, but He perfects us as we run.

A few years ago, my middle daughter, who is a very slender child, decided she wanted to swim across the deep end of the swimming pool. That would give her the right to jump off the diving board. She was about six years old at the time, and she had gotten to the point where she could make it. It was about 60 feet or something like that. She could do it. I knew she could do it, and I said, “Okay, honey, today is the day. It’s time for you to get in the water and to swim across while the lifeguard is watching you, and then you will be able to jump off the board.” She said to me, “Daddy, will you be with me?” and I said, “Sure, I’ll be with you, I’ll be standing right here on the side and I’ll watch you and if anything goes wrong, I’ll take care of you.” She said, “No, will you be with me?” I said, “What do you mean?” She said, “I want you to swim with me.” I said, “You know that I can’t help you. I can’t hold you up or anything.” She said, “I know. I want you to swim beside me as I go.” That is better than standing on the side and watching, but the truth is that what Jesus does for us is even better yet. He does not just say, “I will stand and watch,” or even, “I will swim beside you.” What Jesus does is like years earlier, when I put my hand under the belly of that little child as she swam so that she did not get water in her mouth. That is what the Lord does. He is our perfecter as well as the author of our faith. He is our champion, our pioneer, our perfecter, and He is our model in yet another way.

Chapter 12:2 goes on to say that He, for the joy set before Him, endured the cross. I will do a little Greek with you here. In the phrase “for the joy,” that word “for” is a Greek word *anti*, which has two possible meanings here. I want to tell you about both of them, because they are both true in themselves, and it is a hard decision as to which one he means. One meaning would be that for the sake of the joy set before Him, He ran the race. That is to say, He ran for the sake of the joy that would be His upon the resurrection. He ran for the sake of the joy that would be His when He was welcomed back to heaven, when He was proclaimed to have fulfilled His task, when He was proclaimed to be the Son of God, the Ruler, the Savior with power after He finished His work. Then not only that, but He would have this great train of His brothers and sisters whom He has redeemed, as we talked about earlier, His children coming with Him. For the sake of that joy—looking forward—He endured the shame. That is a true statement. It’s a biblical statement.

There is another possibility as to what Hebrews may mean, because the word *anti* also means—in fact it usually means—“instead of.” We would translate it then this way: “who, instead of the joy set before Him, endured the cross despising its shame.” That would mean that Jesus was in His glory in heaven. He was worshipped in perfect delight, with the throngs of angels around Him and so on, but instead of that—instead of basking in that glory, He endured the cross, despising its shame. The truth is, I am not sure which one the author of Hebrews intended. Perhaps the second is more likely, but this I know: they are both true, and they are both taught at least somewhere in the Bible, and they both aptly describe Jesus’ motive as He ran. “Who for the joy set before Him, endured the cross, despising or scorning its

shame.” He knew what was coming. He evaluated it. It did not surprise Him, but He thought little of it. He thought more of the glory that would be His.

So the writer of Hebrews tells us, “As you look at Jesus, who endured such opposition from sinful men, consider Him so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” You may grow weary. Another way to translate it is, “So although becoming weary, you will not lose heart.” There is nothing wrong with becoming weary, if you are weary in well-doing. If you are tired of the struggle, there is no sin or failure in weariness. The trouble with weariness is that it may cause you to lose heart and cease to run, so although we become weary, we persevere onward. We run to the end. How does that happen? That happens through two things: by looking at Jesus but also by staying strong in the body, through the fellowship and communion that we described earlier.

Let me tell you a story about running. I once ran a 10K race, the only 10K race I have ever run. I had broken my ankle and it never really recovered. My doctor told me that I should not really do anything with my ankle, but I didn’t believe him, so I started running a little to see if I could get some strength and flexibility back. I had never run before, and I had a friend who was a distance runner. He used to run half marathons just for fun a few times a year, and he was thrilled that I was running and wanted to encourage me, so he told me about a 10K run that was coming up in just a few weeks. He convinced me to run it with him. I told him I didn’t think I was really up to it, but he told me he would train with me and he would run with me, so we ran this race together. My ankle bothered me pretty badly the entire time and I was very slow, but John stayed with me. He kept saying, “Dan, you’re doing great.” I was doing worse and worse, and so finally I convinced John to go on ahead. He sprinted off, but as soon as he left me I became inspired. I said to myself, “I am going to finish next to John,” and so I started to run and I started to pass one person and two people and then three and then four and then five and now we’re in the city streets. There were only three blocks to go. I had passed three more people. Some of the earlier runners, the really fast ones, were stretching and cooling off. One of them somehow saw the look on my face and he knew that I was trying to prove something, even though I was thoroughly in the middle of the pack. He looked at me. He fixed his eyes on me, and he practically screamed at me. He said, “Come on, finish with nothing left!” I was inspired. My feet sprouted wings, my hair caught fire, and I soared down the last 200 yards or so. I passed the last three guys and finished only a few steps behind my friend John. It was great. It was a great race.

That race is a little like the race of the Christian life. First of all, I guarantee that I grew weary and I wanted to quit just as the Hebrews wanted to quit. Probably the main thing that beckoned me on was my friend, John. Remember: “Encourage one another daily as long as you call it today. Do not forsake the assembling together.” My friend did not forsake me; he encouraged me. It was really by his aid that I finished the race. I did also have a goal at the end of the line. I was trying to pass people. I was trying to finish nobly in my race. The end line spurred me on. So, in some ways, the race that Christians race is like that race, but there are also a number of differences. First of all, in the town where I finished, the people at the end were some of my friends and also just some people who were shopping. My wife and John’s wife were there waiting for us, and that was nice, but the end in this race that Hebrews talks about is not a human city, but a city without foundations. It is the city of the great king. It is the heavenly Jerusalem toward which we run, and at that finish line there is not a man who gave me and John some little ribbons that said we came in 89th and 90th that day and a little silver thing that said of the males between the ages of 30 and 35 who ran in America in the last year, our time was in the top 40%. No, we get something better. Do you remember back in kindergarten, when everybody who ran got a first place prize? That is really God’s way. Everybody who finishes is a champion. In this spiritual race, that is more true than in the Olympic competition. God has an endless supply of wreaths for the winners—everyone who finishes. What might He say as He would spur us on? He might say for some of

us, “Finish with nothing left!” For others, He would have gentler words, like, “I will never leave you or forsake you. I will be with you always, even to the end of the age.” He might even say, “I endured the cross and despised the shame. I did not consider it to be loss to give My life for you.” We run, Hebrews says, a race as long as life itself. We run to the end, and at the end is Jesus.

The idea of running a race and coming to Jerusalem is actually a theme that is found in various places throughout Hebrews and really throughout the entire Bible. It really begins in chapter 10:35. He says, “You need to persevere so you will receive what was promised.” The focal point of it, however, is chapter 11:10-16. He talks about Abraham, who lived in tents and looked forward to a better city. He speaks of those who received just a tiny fraction of the promises. “These all died,” he says, “not receiving but seeing and welcoming from afar, confessing that they are strangers, outsiders, and exiles on the earth.” They chose not to return to the country they left, even as the Hebrews should choose not to return to the country they left—the country of paganism, of the country of Judaism—but rather, they should run toward the heavenly Jerusalem. Hebrews 13:14 says that they are looking for a city that is to come. This pilgrim theme is one that was once far more prominent in Christian thinking than it is today. It is found in Hebrews. It is found in 1 Peter especially, and it warns us against being too ready to be assimilated to our culture. Whatever nation people are in, they tend to appreciate their own land, their own language, their own customs. Our own culture in the United States is largely Christianized, and we can think that our customs and our culture and our land are close enough to Christianity that it is okay to fit in. Often, of course, it is all right to fit into our society, but we cannot lose this pilgrim theme—the idea that we are pilgrims and aliens and strangers on this earth and we are moving towards not just the improvement of this earth, but toward a heavenly city. If we forget that, we could lose the blessed radicalism that the Gospel would have for us. There is a time to see things in shades of gray, but there is also a time to see the black and the white. There is a time to see the antithesis between the way of God and the way of evil. By remembering that we are really not finally going to make our home in this land, we can retain our edge as Christians.

Let us look on a little further and see what he has to say to us about how to persevere to the end, in Hebrews 12:4 and onward. We will cover this section much more briefly. First, he points out to us that the hardship that they must bear should be understood as discipline—as a call to Christian growth, and as a warning that they still have some distance to cover. Verse 4 says, “In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.” That is to say, “If you are weary now, I assure you, brothers, more is coming. It is possible that you will be shedding your blood soon, so do not wear out yet. If you are in danger of wearing out before blood is even spilt, that may be an indicator that you need to get stronger so that you will be able to endure. Therefore, the discipline that you receive, the sufferings that you have right now are discipline from God to inspire you to become stronger, and (as he says a little later, around verse 12) to inspire you to not be disabled, to strengthen your feet, to strengthen your arms and your weak knees and start to run cleanly and clearly. See the hardship you face as a discipline to drive you to become stronger.

In verses 14 to 18, he gives us a series of pieces of advice on how to live in general, especially in a time of persecution. He says that you should seek peace with all men. This is good advice: do not pursue any difficulty. We might say, do not stimulate unnecessary trouble. The second piece of advice is to pursue holiness, and the third is to avoid bitterness. Bitterness—anger at God or at others—can poison us. If you are angry at God, you cannot listen to Him. You cannot receive from Him. Next he warns against sensuality, like the sensuality of Esau, who sold his birthright for a bowl of stew and allowed his appetites to rule him. He sought the benefits of spirituality, but he was not willing to deny his flesh. Avoid sensuality. Then he gives us one last warning: realize that we have to deal with the great God who is the judge of all the earth. Verse 18 is the rhetorical climax of this section. He says that as you come to

God, you must understand, “You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire, to darkness, gloom and storm, to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them.” You have not come to that mountain. He is referring, of course, to Mount Sinai. He is saying, Sinai was frightening. It trembled. There was smoke. There was lightning. There was the blast of the trumpet. If even an animal touched that mountain, it was to be stoned to death. Moses himself, who was acquainted with the presence of God and talked with to God face-to-face, said, “I am trembling with fear.” If you think that was frightening, Hebrews says, you have not seen anything yet, because that mountain is only a shadow of the mountain of the Almighty God. Verse 22 continues: “But you have come to Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God.” This is indeed the place where the angels rejoice, where the church has the names of its firstborn written, where the assembly of the righteous dwells, where Jesus the covenant mediator and sprinkles His blood, but it is also the place of the Almighty God. He is the God who is a consuming fire and He will shake all creation. You must be sure, Hebrews says, that you are ready and grounded for that shaking that is to come. We will all be shaken, and the only way to be ready to stand in that shaking is by belonging to Christ and by desiring to run to that finish line. Therefore, he warns against sloth one more time.

Chapter 13 unfolds from there. This chapter gives a variety of points of general advice and counsel to all Christians for living well in this time and enduring together. He tells us to be sure to entertain strangers, to remember to aid prisoners; that is to say, continue to encourage each other in your walk as Christians. He tells us to remain sexually pure and keep the marriage bed undefiled. He warns against turning freedom into greed. He advises us to be content with God’s gifts, submit to leaders, and stay doctrinally pure. Allow your leaders to lead you, because if you grumble against them and resist them, it will not do you any good. You need leaders, and they need to have their task of leadership made pleasant by you not resisting them and fighting them at every turn.

One last time, then, he tells us to suffer with Christ and he offers that blessed benediction, one of the sweetest benedictions in the pages of Scripture: “May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever.” This is the blessing he gives. With all the warnings, the last word is a word of blessing, the word of greeting, the word of the love of God. That is the end of the book of Hebrews, a great call to perseverance and endurance in the face of difficulty.

Let us turn now to look at James. James is such a very different book from the book of Hebrews. There is quite a contrast between the two books. On one level, for example, Hebrews is a book that people are a little bit afraid of. It is so complex and so in some ways even foreign, but James is so practical. It is almost like Proverbs. If you do not know what to do in your family devotions, if you do not have a lot of time, just pick up the book of Proverbs and read a couple proverbs. That is something we can do; hear some wisdom from God. Don’t do it too often, because it is atomistic, but James is kind of like that too. You can just read it and think about some guidance for everyday life. We like the book of James. It is accessible; it is striking in its exhortations. On the other hand, it also stings us with a blessed sting. One author has said, “Its call to realize the ideals that we profess in appropriate action is spoken with a prophetic urgency to generations of readers who have found James’ directives difficult to perform rather than to understand.” The ideals are there, and so is the call to live up to them. James is so much like the Sermon on the Mount. It is so clear, so powerful, so penetrating, so convincing, and the very clarity becomes the problem, because it is so difficult to avoid what is so patently said. At the popular level, Christians like James. However, you may not know this, but James is perhaps the most roundly criticized of all the books of the New Testament by scholars—and not just liberal critical scholars, but

unfortunately, even some evangelicals have viewed James as kind of an inferior work in certain ways. In fact, the four main criticisms of James which have been echoed through the centuries were articulated first by Martin Luther. If you would like to look it up, it is in his *Table Talk*, volume 54 of his works, pages 424 and 425. You might wonder how Luther managed to write 54 volumes of works. His students took careful notes of everything he said for a while, and he got a few volumes in that way. In *Table Talk*, he gives four criticisms of James. I want you to know these not so that you can criticize James, but so that we have an answer to these criticisms to understand the book better.

The first criticism is that it contains almost nothing of Christ, so that it is dissident with the rest of the apostolic message. It is true that if you look at the book of James, there is nothing about the cross of Christ, about the atonement, about His high priestly ministry, or about His blood. None of those things are mentioned. The name “Lord Jesus Christ” is only mentioned a few times. That is true, but the picture of Christ as Lord and as a redeemer are still there. The language is not the language that we are accustomed to. He is called the Lord. In a sense, we could call James a meditation on the lordship of Christ over our ethical lives. In fact, that may be the main thing that the book is: a meditation on the lordship of Christ over our ethical lives. But second, as we will see, James also contains a great deal about the need for Christ and the remedy we have for our sin in Christ. This is not stated in the ordinary language but in its own way.

The second criticism is this: Many people allege that James was written by someone who was not an apostle and therefore was not worthy to write. Some people say the writer was some unknown James. Most people say it was James, the brother of our Lord. They say that he knew Jesus during His earthly life, but he did not believe in Him, so how could James, an unbeliever during Jesus’ life, give a good testimony? I suppose that is a fair question, but it kind of proves a little too much, doesn’t it? If you accepted that standard, you would lose the 13 letters of Paul and Jude and Luke and Acts. Luke was not an apostle; he was one of the apostolic band. In fact, only eight of the 27 books of the New Testament were written by the apostles within the original 12, so we really should not complain about James not being an apostle. The real issue for scholars is that they believe that the Greek of James is too good for someone who was just a farmer from rural Palestine. That criticism shows a lack of understanding. It is an older criticism, and it shows a lack of understanding of the educated nature of the people living in Palestine. It is true that literacy was not very common in antiquity, but do you know what people group had a higher level of literacy than almost anybody else? It was the Jews. Do you know why? It was so that they could read the Scriptures. That was crucial. Throughout the ancient world, and really throughout the world today wherever people live in a land where two or three languages are spoken, it is actually very easy. Another way to say this is that in many parts of the world, illiterate people can speak fluently two or three or four languages. All that is needed is repeated exposure, and if it is indeed the case, as it seems to be, that nearly half of all the people living in Palestine were Greek-speaking, then those who lived there could easily write excellent Greek, so that is not a problem.

A third criticism—and this one is perhaps the most important of them—is this: the book of James is accused (and we will talk about this more than once) of flitting chaotically from one topic to the next. People say that James has no clear internal logic or structure and that James is just jumping from one teaching to the next. In fact, however, James is definitely very well structured. It is structured according to the patterns of rhetoric. Those critics—especially those who lived around the turn of the 20th century, from about 1900-1930—who said that James is chaotic and poorly organized, lived in a time when the conventions of ancient rhetoric were unknown. In ancient times, rhetoric was the one thing that students studied every year. It is a little like how, in the United States, we study English every year. We have to do composition and writing in history classes. We are always writing. We are always studying the language. In a similar way, people were always studying rhetoric in the ancient world. What was

rhetoric? Rhetoric included general factual knowledge, but also arranging it to persuade people. Rhetoric included the skill to make arguments, to pursue the truth, and to sell things if necessary. Everybody knew the conventions of rhetoric, including James. He used them and he structured his book according to them. If you live in a time when nobody studies rhetoric, you might look at James and say that it is poorly organized, but the problem is not with James. The problem is with you, if you do not have the ability to recognize the structure that is there, and indeed it is there.

The fourth criticism is this: it is said that the book of James was not respected by the early church as canonical. Eusebius is a notable early church historian who wrote around 320 or 330 A.D., and Eusebius said that some people disputed whether James was actually biblical. Jerome, a great scholar from the early Christian days, said that James was only accepted incrementally in the ancient world. However, that is almost like saying, “Well, James was not written by Paul and it was not one of the Gospels,” because incremental acceptance was the rule for all of the books that were not Pauline Epistles or Gospels.

What we need to do, then, is to accept James on its own terms. James is a book of rhetorical argumentation for a certain way of life. One scholar, Luke Timothy Johnson, has written a book in which he says that it follows the pattern of protreptic discourse, by which he means discourse that is oriented to persuade people to live a certain kind of life. That is what James is. It is an argument to live a life under the lordship of Christ. It is indeed a very rhetorical book, and it is a little bit like Hebrews in that it is a sermonic kind of book. Listen with me and follow with me and see the rhetorical flavor and the flourishes and the sermonic nature of James.

First of all, the book addresses people in very direct terms. For example, repeatedly he speaks to “my brothers,” or “my dear brothers,” or simply, “brothers” or “you rich,” or negatively, “you adulterous people.” He addresses people directly. He gives lots of commands. There are 59 commands in the Book of James. The whole book only has about 105 verses and there are 59 commands. Of those 59 commands, 46 are direct commands, saying, “you go do this.” Thirteen others are along the lines of “let us” or “let us all” or something like that. James also shows its character in the rhetorical flavor. An example would be the rhetorical questions. You could turn to chapter 2:4-7 with me and look at a string of rhetorical questions that the author puts to his friends. He is depicting the scene where a rich and poor man come into church or synagogue simultaneously and the usher says to the rich man, “You can have a good seat,” and he says to the poor man, “You sit on the floor here or stand in the corner over there.” Then he puts a few questions to them very rhetorically. He says, “If you do this, have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” That is the question he puts to them. He says, “Listen, my brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you?” There are the second and third rhetorical questions. “Are they not the ones dragging you into court?” There is the fourth. Verse 7 says, “Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?” So there are many rhetorical questions in this rhetorical book, and there are quite a few others.

Another rhetorical device James uses is imagining people who raise objections and answering some of those objections. An example would be in chapter 2:18. As James is really developing Jesus’ idea that everyone who has true faith will show it by their deeds, in verse 18, somebody breaks in—an imaginary interlocutor—and James says, “But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have deeds.’” He’s imagining himself addressing a group of people, and as he speaks to them, he says, “I know what some of you are thinking. I am insisting on good deeds, but some of you are thinking, ‘The right thing for some of us is good deeds and for others it is good faith. It is just a matter of different gifts. Some of us

just do not have the gift of works.” He says, “Let me answer that for you.” He does the same thing a number of other times: for example, chapter 1:13, chapter 3:13, and chapter 5:13.

Rhetorical questions and answers imply that the audience should be with James. He sometimes shows a little energetic impatience with his people. In chapter 1:16, he says “Don’t be mistaken.” In chapter 2:22, he says, “Don’t you see?” In chapter 4:1, he says “Come now, you who are going to trade. Come now, you rich.” In chapter 4:4, he says, “Don’t you know?” That is rhetorical language which is designed even to shame people to see the error of their ways. James also uses many illustrations which shows that he is a preacher, a teacher. When you read the book before, did you ever notice the illustrations James uses? He talks about the bits of horses and the rudders of ships. He talks about flowers that fade and mists that settle on lakes. He talks about boats and fire and looking into a mirror and trading. He talks about farm work and traveling here and there. He mentions Old Testament heroes and fire coming down from heaven. James is very full of illustrations because he is rhetorical and he wants to capture people’s attention.

Speaking of capturing attention, James sometimes does this with very paradoxical language. Almost the first thing he says is, “Rejoice in your trials. Consider it all joy when various trials befall you.” This is paradoxical language. It makes you think, “Why would I do a thing like that?” He says that the rich man should boast in his humiliation. He says demons are believers. Demons believe, and they shudder. He throws together ideas that do not fit together very well: the rich howl as their riches rot and as their gold and silver and precious metals eat their flesh like fire. The mowers cry out for their wages and the ones who keep those wages buy food and get fat in order to be slaughtered like cattle on the day when God comes to visit.

James is a book full of energetic imagery. James is a book that has its own logic, its own way of working, and its own way of taking people into the paths of God’s thinking about the good Christian life.

I will mention to you one or two more things very briefly. I do believe that the author of James is the brother of Jesus, because he fits very well the profile of James, the brother of Jesus who was a leader of the Jerusalem church in Acts 15. I am not going to go into this point in detail, but there are a number of rare words which are found in the New Testament only in the speech of James in Acts 15 and in the book of James. If Luke is recording well, then it makes sense that the person who used these rare words in James 1 to 5 is the same as the one who used these rare words that only appear in Acts 15. That is one way of arguing. Another argument is that the picture of James in the book and the picture of James in Acts 15 is very similar. They both have a zeal for the law of God. They both have a lot of knowledge of the Jewish people. They both show concerns for making peace. Acts 15 tells about the Jerusalem council, where James is trying to bring people together. A little later, we will see how he makes peace in James 3. More important, I think, is to recognize that James is writing for a Jewish audience. We will see the importance of that in a just a few minutes, but we might say that a Jewish audience is apparent by reading backwards. When I say “reading backwards,” I mean that you read the way in which James addresses his people and you say, “Who would be interested in the kinds of problems that James addresses?” or “Who would need the teaching that James addresses, and who would understand the language of James?” Let me give you an example of that. James says that Elijah prayed, and it did not rain for three and a half years. In the book of Kings, however, it says it did not rain for three years. Why did he add a half a year? Why would you do something like that? The reason is that, in Palestine and only in Palestine, “3½” was a round number. He was rounding off “3” to “3½” because half of seven is three and a half. If you look at the book of Revelation, you will see another round number: “time, times and half a time.” That is three and a half. There are things that go on for 1260 days, which is roughly

three and a half years. I will give you some other examples. He talks about waiting for the early and the late rains. There is only one place around the Mediterranean where there were two rainy seasons. That was on the east coast of the Mediterranean in Palestine. He talks about taking pride in monotheism: “You believe that God is one; you do well.” Who took pride in monotheism in the ancient world? Everybody was a polytheist. Who took pride in monotheism? The Jews did. In chapter 2, he depicts a scene in which people come into a synagogue that is full for worship. That fits the Jewish scene. Here is one more revealing example. In James 4 and 5, those who want to get rich do so by trading. Those who are already rich hold land. That is exactly the way in which it was done in Palestine in the first century, because land was very difficult to obtain. You had to be rich to buy much land, and the only way you could get rich if you were poor was by trading. That is exactly the scene described in James.

What we have, then, is this: James is a Christian writing to Jewish Christians who have the needs of their day. Perhaps more than anything else, the need that they faced was a carryover from the Jewish people before they became Christians. That is pride in their theology—the idea that if you know the truth, that is good enough, and if you have right doctrine, you have right religion and real faith. Those sorts of ideas—which contain a small amount of truth that can be greatly abused—are what James will work on.