

James 1:19-27.

It's easy to spiral downward in a trial, isn't it? Beforehand, a Christian might proclaim that God is always good. Yet, during it, that same man may struggle to think anything that's true. It's possible he struggles to believe what he once firmly believed about God.

Some of the people to whom James wrote were in a downward spiral. James reminded that God is the giver of all good things. This opening chapter called his audience to reign in their thoughts. In these verses, James called those suffering to humbly go back to God's Word, read and apply it to their lives. Be hearers of God's Word... and doers of it.

By the 1500's, more than a thousand years had passed since commoners had read the Word of God for themselves. It was only available in Latin. Translation was illegal, and attempts to do so were destroyed. Burning books? It's hard for us to imagine, but knowledge is power, and English Bibles were once destroyed for that reason.

Educated at Oxford and Cambridge, William Tyndale (1494-1536) was able to read the Bible. A comfortable life could have been his, but he desired to give his countrymen a Bible they could read. The authorities denied his requests to translate Scripture and sternly warned him. Thus, he fled England to become a fugitive.

Tyndale moved to modern-day Germany to work in secrecy. Even there, he remained on the run. He often went without food, lacked clothing, and hardly rested. Yet, with each year, more of the Bible was translated into English. It wasn't hard to find a publisher though—demand back in England was fierce; thus, a market for any publisher who would help. Eventually, hundreds-of-thousands of copies made their way into the country within a decade.

Having been caught and condemned, Tyndale's last words were a prayer: "Lord! Open the King of England's eyes." Within a year of this, King Henry VIII legalized Bible reading and even ordered copies of the English Bible to be displayed throughout England. The irony is that nearly every page on display was based upon the work of the fugitive reformer, William Tyndale.

The trials Tyndale faced would have ended if he stopped translating, but he refused. Having been absorbed with God's Word hour upon hour every day for years, he understood the value of this Book. This is how he found the strength press on.

BEING QUICK TO LISTEN

(JAMES 1:19-21)

James 1:19—"Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger"

God uses trials in the life of His people (Jas 1:2-12), and in every trial lies the temptation to sin (Jas 1:13-18). James knew some who read his letter would be struggling, even ready to accuse God of doing evil. He called them to reign in their thoughts. Yes, some trials are hard, but is God still good nonetheless? Of course, He is.

Therefore, "let every person be quick to hear..." Quick to hear what? The Word of God. Rather than let your mind wander from one bad thought to another, fill it with Scripture when suffering. Let God's Word act as an anchor in the midst of a storm.

"THIS BOOK IS WORTH ALL THE BOOKS THAT EVER WERE PRINTED, AND IT HAS BEEN MY MISFORTUNE THAT I NEVER FOUND TIME TO READ IT..." — PATRICK HENRY.

Sin works like wax in the ears of a Christian. Where there was once a quickness to listen, a sluggishness has developed. James' readers were Jewish Christians—they knew the Old Testament well. Yet, in the midst of their storm, they had become slow to listen, quick to speak or accuse God of wrongdoing, and quick to become angry.

This is why James says, "to put away all filthiness" in order to receive the "implanted Word" (Jas 1:21). His readers knew Scripture—they needed to put away wrong thinking and living to receive it again into their lives. "Filthiness" had built up as wax does in the ears. Figuratively, James wanted his readers to clear out their ears. Be quick or eager to hear the Word once again.

Hearers and Doers

SPIRITUAL AUDITORS

(JAMES 1:22-25)

It's possible to read the Bible and only move the bookmark forward, isn't it? As a student who audits attends class but does no homework, it's possible to learn about the Bible without obeying anything it says. This concerned James.

James 1:22—"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves."

Christ doesn't want His people to merely hear Him. He calls them to a life of obedience. In Luke 9:23, He explained, "If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me." The Lord desires allegiance even to the point of death (Luke 14:26-27, 33).

Christians disobey Christ. They sin, and He is gracious. Yet, one who regularly disregards and challenges Christ should ask if He knows Him at all. It's what Paul said to the Corinthians, "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves" (2 Cor 13:5). James gives a similar warning. If you're a hearer of the Word but not a doer, you're self-deceived. It's possible to go to church all your life, listen to sermons, serve others, and read the Bible, and yet, not know Christ.

One purpose of Scripture is to expose spiritual dirt. James says the Word is like a mirror (Jas 1:23-24). Ancient mirrors were made of polished metals, and it wasn't always easy to see yourself. You had to gaze or look intently at the mirror to really see. To be a "hearer" but not a "doer" is to gaze intently, be convicted, and then do nothing about it. Why bother staring into the mirror at all?

Glancing into an ancient mirror didn't accomplish much, and neither does a cursory glance into the Bible. James' audience had looked intently into God's Word, but they kept failing to apply it. Suffering had likely distracted and affected their thinking. James urged them to focus, to fix their eyes intently upon God's Word and persevere (Jas 1:25). To do otherwise may be tempting, but it's a sign of self-deception.

The man who is blessed isn't the one who knows the Bible, but the one who applies it to life. James wanted his readers to persevere in their application of Scripture. He reminded them of God's goodness, for instance. They needed to hold onto this fact though their lives didn't seem good at all.

PURE RELIGION

(JAMES 1:26-27)

James 1:26-27—"If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world."

How do you know if Christian faith is real? James says to look at your words and your actions.

The average person speaks 18,000 words each day—enough to make a 400-page book every week! We talk a lot, and according to Christ, "the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart" (Matt 12:34). If you lie regularly, slander, flatter, gossip, etc.—if these are normal parts of your life in politics, guess what? You've deceived yourself about your faith. James goes so far as to say your religion is worthless.

What about our actions? James turns our attention to orphans and widows, the most vulnerable members of society. Safety nets such as welfare and life insurance didn't exist at the time. To be an orphan or widow was to be in dire straits.

Now, to look across the aisle at church and do nothing for a brother or sister who needs help is another sign of a worthless religion. Some of James' readers were using their tongues in anger or to lash out at God for their suffering. Others were so consumed with their own suffering they failed to see those who had it worse.

The theme of James' letter is that true faith works. Works do not save, but true faith shows itself practically. Religion that's true and honorable to God looks intently into His Word, and applies it to life. Doing so affects a believer's words and actions even in the midst of the harshest storm.