

James 4:1-10.

Rameses II (1279–1213 BC) may have been the greatest and most powerful Pharaoh of ancient Egypt. Wanting to be remembered forever, Rameses set his heart on massive building projects. He had colossal temples and monuments built throughout the land, some of which have survived to the present.

One of his statues was excavated and arrived at the British Museum in the early nineteenth century. Upon arrival in London, the poet, Percy Shelley, wrote this sonnet:

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

Ozymandias, or Rameses II, hasn't been forgotten, but all that's left of his reign are fragments and rubble. One day not even that much will remain. It reminds me that all we do for ourselves will tarnish and pass; only what's done for God will last.

James 4:6—"God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

When James wrote his letter, many who read it wanted to be church leaders (Jas 3:1). They wanted to be heard and have their own set of followers; build their own empire of sorts.

Sadly, many of the churches that received this letter had leaders jockeying for power. Their speech was foul and unedifying, their conduct was foolish and unwise (Jas 3). Nonetheless, they wanted a position it seems at all cost.

FACTIONS AND INFIGHTING

(JAMES 4:1-3)

James has already said that trials aren't the problem in life, we are (Jas 1:14-15). We want what God hasn't given and are tempted to get it on our own. Trials act as a roadblock. We can either trust God when our desires are thwarted or sin against Him to get what we want. The churches to whom James wrote had people willing to sin against God to get the position they wanted.

When you survey the problems that James wrote against, many men were fixated upon leading, having a voice in the church, and gaining power. The inevitable result? Factions (Jas 4:1-2). Some believers were behind one leader; others rallied behind another. It's similar to what Paul found at the church in Corinth (1 Cor 1:11-13).

**"WHENEVER A MAN HAS CAST A LONGING EYE ON
OFFICES, A ROTTENNESS BEGINS IN HIS CONDUCT"**

~ THOMAS JEFFERSON.

So, James asks, "What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?" (Jas 4:1). He goes on to say the problems in these churches were warring passions or desires. Rather than a singular passion to exalt Christ, believers had been torn into competing factions. Sure, they wanted to glorify God; yet, they also wanted their faction, their man, to win or lead.

The language James chose indicates more than minor disagreement: "You desire and do not have, so you murder" (Jas 4:2). Did they actually kill each other? Maybe, but "murder" is likely figurative for bitter fighting. It seems believers were destroying each other to gain a bit of power or to hold onto a position.

And as bad as acting on wrong desires is to pray that God would endorse them. James thunders, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions!" (Jas 1:3). God as a genie, praying like Aladdin asking for wishes to be granted.

Does God exist to grant wishes? Of course not, but sometimes we pray, "My will be done" instead of "Thy will be done" (Matt 6:9-10). And, in this case, the will of many churchgoers wasn't even godly.

Pride before the Fall

Was the problem here a desire for higher office? Not at all. The problem James called out is selfish desire. He knew there were men who wanted to lead God's people, but it was for the sake of their own gain. Their conduct was poor, their prayers were self-centered, and it resulted in division. Churches torn asunder.

CONFRONTING THE REAL PROBLEM (JAMES 4:4-6)

Sin is foremost against God. Consider King David who took his friend's wife, murdered him, and then lied about it for months. It took time, but he eventually pled for forgiveness saying to the Lord, "Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight" (Psa 51:4). You only? He sinned against many people, and yet, David realized his sin was still primarily against God—the One who had ordained marriage, created life, and is truth.

Self-exaltation, self-centeredness, pride—these sins were harming many churches. Love of prominence and positions had eclipsed a love for God. And what does James call it? Spiritual adultery. He writes: "You adulterous people!" (Jas 4:4).

In what sense is sin spiritual adultery? Well, Christians are people united to God through Christ Jesus (Col 3:3). They have been joined to the Lord and are no longer their own. Paul told the Corinthians to glorify God as a result (1 Cor 6:17-20). To the Romans, he said to present themselves as living sacrifices—in light of God's immense mercy, it's the only reasonable thing to do (Rom 12:1-2).

God's people belong to Him. The church is even called the bride of Christ (2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:22-33). And, like a faithful spouse, God's jealousy burns when the hearts of His people are knit to another. When Christians love worldly things, God's Spirit longs or yearns for them to love Him once again (Jas 4:5).

What does God do when His people go astray? James answered it this way: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (Jas 4:6). He pursues His people, and it isn't pleasant. He stands against or "opposes" them. It's not vengeance but grace that the Lord would even bother. He's at work lovingly disciplining His wayward child (Heb 12:5-11) and then giving grace when they humbly repent and come home.

TURNING BACK TO GOD

(JAMES 4:7-10)

James 4:10—"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you."

Jesus told a parable of two sons, one was licentious and the other was legalistic. You may know it better as the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). The licentious son no longer wanted to live with his loving father. Asking for his inheritance, he basically told his dad to drop dead: *Get out of the way, and give me my money.* The father gave up a large sum, the son leaves, and then utterly squanders it.

Now starving to death, the licentious son comes to his senses. He humbles himself and walks home, which isn't much of a surprise. Anyone who heard Jesus would've expected the story to go like that. The shocker comes when Jesus tells of the dad's response: he had been waiting for his boy to come home. The dad sees his son at a distance, actually runs to welcome him, hugs him, places his own robe on him, and celebrates.

This may be the most outlandish parable Jesus ever told. Those who heard would've expected that profligate to be whipped, disowned, or publically shamed for dishonoring the family. At least, that was their view of God. The father let his boy reap the consequences of his sin, but when he the son repented or turned back in all humility, the dad was ready to restore. When a believer walks in sin and then humbles himself, it's no different than this father. God is eager to restore His own.

James ends this section with rapid-fire commands that center upon this concept of repentance: Submit yourself to God, resist the devil, draw near to God, cleanse your hands, purify your hearts, mourn, and weep. What's he getting at? Humbly turning from sin and self back to God.

If you read through James 4, it's a heavy confrontation, but he ends it on an encouraging note. He was calling the churches reading his letter to turn from their various factions. He wanted those pursuing positions, leading these factions, to turn back to Christ. If they would only turn back, healing would take place throughout and God would wipe the slate clean (Isa 1:18).