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A0802 – January 13, 2008 – Jas 5:19-20 – The Salvation of The Soul Revisited

mes 5:19-20 Ἀδελφοί, ἐάν τις ἐν ὑμῖν πλανηθῆ ἀπὸ τῆς ἀληθείας, καὶ ἐπιστρέψῃ τις αὐτόν, ²⁰γινωσκέτω ὅτι ὁ ἐπιστρέψας ἁμαρτωλὸν ἐκ πλάνης ὁδοῦ αὐτοῦ σώσει ψυχὴν ἐκ θανάτου, καὶ καλύψει πλῆθος ἁμαρτιῶν.

James 5:19-20 My brothers, if anyone among you has wandered from the truth, and someone turns him back, ²⁰know that turning a sinner from his wandering way will rescue his life from death, and will cover a multitude of sins.

James 5:19-20 My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, ²⁰let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

What we have here is pictured very vividly in the Greek. Your brother has departed on a journey and along the way he lost his way and started heading down the wrong road. He did not know but the road he was on lead to a dangerous part of town where gangs and other dangers await. You go to your brother and turn him around and help him find his way. Thus he is saved from the dangers of going the wrong way. It is very vivid and it is very simple. But again it is very misunderstood, particularly by those who hold to Lordship Salvation because they believe this brother is saved from going to hell. Actually this is a continuation of the previous verses which dealt with a spiritually weak brother, weary under the heavy weight of a trial and his calling for the spiritually mature to help him get out of bed, take a shower, fix his hair, pray for him, encourage him. The prayer offered by the spiritually mature will rescue him from his spiritual weariness and the Lord will restore his spiritual posture, help him get on his feet spiritually. The great prayer of

a spiritual man availeth much. When we go into spiritual failure we need the prayer of a righteous man to aid in the restoration. Of course, personal confession of sin to God is also required if that is the cause of the spiritual weakness. And of course, physical ailments could also accompany the spiritual problems but the root of any physical problems is spiritual in nature and so must be dealt with before physical problems can be alleviated. Verse 16, confess your sins to one another deals with the confession of the sin to the elders but the general teaching of Scripture is to never confess beyond the circle of that sin's influence. Private sin requires private confession. Public sin requires public confession. If we do this we will be healed the text says, the Greek indicates healing beyond physical problems and points to spiritual healing or restoration. Thus we will be given renewed energy to endure the trial at hand. The example of the prayer of a righteous man is Elijah. He was a man like us. He didn't have any special power. All believers have the ability to accomplish mighty things through prayer if we are living righteous lives. Elijah really prayed that it would not rain for 3 ½ years and it did not rain. He prayed this because of the nation's spiritual idolatry under King Ahab. At the end of the 3 ½ years he met the Baal prophets at Mt Carmel and challenged them to a contest to see who was the One true God, Baal or YHWH. Elijah won the contest. The people confessed that YHWH was God and Elijah prayed again to the Lord and the heaven's poured rain and the earth produced its fruit. Now we continue with that in verses 19-20. **My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, ²⁰let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.**

Verse 19, James begins with the words **My brethren**, a common address to fellow Jewish believers of the *Diaspora* throughout the epistle ([Jas 1:2](#); [2:1, 14](#); [3:1, 10, 12](#); [5:12, 19](#)). So, he is still talking to believers. These are not professing believers they are genuine believers. Thus the salvation in v 20 is not salvation of unbelievers but rather the salvation of believers. We've already encountered this in 1:21 where James says, "in humility receive the word implanted which is able to save your souls." His point is that believers need to be saved from the death-dealing consequences of sin which can range all the way from temporal loss of fellowship to premature physical death. The salvation as always is provided by God but the means of salvation is a constant humble reception of the word of truth. So there are many parallels between James 1 and our passage today in James 5 where a believer has

strayed from the truth and needs a fellow believer to turn him back in order to be saved from premature physical death and the death dealing temporal consequences of sin. So he addresses them as **My brethren** because they are fellow believers in Jesus Christ.

if, and this is a 3rd class condition, *ean* with the subjunctive is always a 3rd class condition expressing what will probably take place. In other words it is probable that believers will stray from the truth. This is the natural tendency of the carnal mind. It gravitates away from truth and replaces it with falsehood. As Timothy stated so clearly, “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths” (2 Tim 4:3-4). The word of God never teaches that if a person is a genuine believer they will never stray from the truth and turn aside to myths. In fact it teaches that believers will stray from the truth and to guard against it we are to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, cast down vain speculations and destroy speculations exalted against the knowledge of God. It takes mental exertion, it takes constancy of studying the truth, it takes godly discipline. It’s not enough to go to church, memorize a verse or two, read a Christian book. So, **if**, and that’s an **if** of probability, **any among you strays from the truth**. The Greek for **strays** is *planaomai*, a deponent verb connected to our 3rd class condition. It can be translated “wanders away”. In fact it’s used very vividly in the LXX in Ps 94:10 of the generation of Israel that “wandered” in the wilderness” for forty years. It didn’t mean they weren’t His people, it just meant they were under divine discipline for disobedience to His word. So if any among you wanders from the truth. And I don’t know what you do about those believers who wander from the truth but aren’t among you. I can’t keep everyone straight and chase everyone down who wanders from the truth. But we have a responsibility to those **among** us in our local congregation. Well, **if** they “wander away” **from the truth**. The word for **truth** is *aleitheia*. We’re talking about ultimate truth, absolute truth, true for me, true for you, true for everyone, what is, reality whether you believe it or not. As Francis Schaeffer used to call it “true truth”. This would be a Christian who was not “walking in the truth”. Turn to 2 John 4, just a few pages to the right after Peter. “I was very glad to find *some* of your children walking in truth, just as we have received commandment *to do* from the Father.” This is what God desires for His children but not all children

walk in the truth, some wander. For example turn to 2 Tim 2:18. In v 15 Paul charges Timothy to accurately handle the word of *aletheia* and in verse 16 to avoid worldly *and* empty chatter, for it will lead to further ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene.” And then we read about a couple of believer’s who have fallen into this trap. “Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, *men* who have gone astray from the *aletheia* saying that the resurrection has already taken place, and they upset the faith of some.” This is departure from sound doctrine. There is no question the word of God teaches that genuine believers can wander away from the truth. Drop down to v 24-26 where Timothy get’s instruction on how to handle a believer who strays from the truth, “The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge (*epignosis*) of the *aleitheia*, and they may come to their senses *and escape* from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will.” So, we’re getting instruction from James along these same lines. What a spiritually mature believer should do when he sees his brother straying from the truth. As we see from Jas 5:20 it can have serious consequences so the loving thing to do is to **turn him back**. This is the verb *epistrepho*, an important verb in the NT. It means to “turn him around” or “return him” because he’s heading down a path of destruction. Now, it’s obvious if the goal is to return him to the truth then he once believed the truth. So, this is a believer who has been deceived by false doctrine, he’s received false teaching and he’s bought into it. This is very common. I’d say this is by far the vast majority of Christians. This is predicted by Scripture that this age, the age of grace or the church would end in apostasy. That word, “apostasy” does not mean what a lot of people think it means when they say, “Oh, the world is such a terribly immoral place. There are mass killings and rapes and adultery and all that.” What the apostasy means in Scripture is that believers will depart from sound doctrine. Just like Paul said to Timothy, “they will not endure sound doctrine.” And there’s a lot of Christians who simply won’t endure it. I’ve seen them come right in here and walk right out. They don’t want to hear it. Why are you going on and on trying to get the right interpretation and being so critical of other views? Can’t we just all get along, hold hands, eat a cupcake and feel good.” And the answer is “No, we’re not interested in that. We’re interested in God’s word. We’re interested in sound doctrine. Not some sermonette for Christianette’s.” So, if you have a friend who’s into all this feel-good Christianity and wouldn’t

know a passive voice if it hit him upside the head your job is to help him get on the truth track, get serious about the word of God and quit playing games. In all likelihood a lot of those people may not even be believers so you're going to have to ask them basic questions, "How does a person get to heaven?" and if they can't even answer that right then don't presume they're really a Christian. I'd assume they're not and give them the gospel. If they say anything other than faith in Jesus Christ is required, if they say you have to say a prayer, you have to commit your life to Christ, you have to be water baptized, you have to go to church, you have to pray, you have to turn from your past sins, you have to confess your sins, you have to do good works, if they say any of that then assume they will not be in heaven and proceed from there. If they are a believer, they understand the gospel, they've personally trusted Christ but they are into all this Purpose-Driven mess, Emergent Church Mess, Psychobabble mess, Psychology mess then they need to be turned back, *epistrepho*, they need to turn back to the sufficiency of Scripture. Jesus prayed "Sanctify them in truth, Your word is truth." That other garbage does not set us apart from the world system. It makes us a part of the world system. Only the word of God sets us apart from the world. So believers have got to be turned back and I am so sick and tired of seeing Christians get in a jam and turn their back on the only solution, the word of God and exchange it for some HVP gimmick. These people may be believers but their confidence is in man, in man's rationalism. That is not going to work because man is not sufficient. If man were sufficient then why would you need God. With that in mind turn to Gal 4:9, "But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back [*epistrepho*] again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?" What were they enslaved to? Verse 8, "those things which by nature are no gods." Enslaved to man and man's HVP solution's. Back to James, **if any among you wanders away from the truth and one turns him back**, verse 20, **let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death. let him know?** Who know? Who's him? The sinner or the savior? The sinner. Let the sinner know. He's building a case gratitude as an attitude. You know I cannot tell you how thankful I am for certain Christians in my life that have directed me into the truth when I was out in the tuley's. You've been in the tuley's pastor? Oh yeah, I've had some strange ideas, I've believed myths and legends, been involved in the occult and I was a believer at the time. So, I am so grateful that there have been believers come into my life

and say, “Hello, idiot, what are you doing, we’ve got the truth over here. Who needs that garbage? Get back on the truth track.” And here I am. God used them as a means of saving me from the consequences described in this verse. **let him know that he who turns** and there’s the Greek word *epistrepho* again, there’s the human responsibility, God uses believers who are spiritually mature to **turn them from error**.

The Greek word for **save** is *sozo* and means “to deliver, to rescue” from some imminent danger. But what is the imminent danger? Remember, they are on the path of James 1:14-15. Their minds and lives are full of moral filthiness. Where does the path of James 1:14-15 lead? What’s the end product of sin? If it reaches maturity the end product is “death”. This is physical death, pre-mature physical death due to unchecked sin. The wages of sin is death, always, everywhere for everyone, believer and unbeliever (Rom 6:23)ⁱ. Obviously, the death an unbeliever earns is eternal separation from God in the lake of fire (aka the second death Rev 20:11-15). But what kinds of death can a believer earn by sinning? The believer by sinning is temporally separated from God, he’s out of fellowship with God, he experiences darkness and spiritual depression. If this separation remains because of the believer’s failure to confess or repent of the sin then his sin matures and eventually he experiences pre-mature physical death. James doesn’t want this for these believers. The answer is not to continue to sin and die but to put off sin, run to the word of God and be saved! The word has the ability to **save** the believer’s **soul**. So, they are not being saved from hell here. They are being saved from the deadly consequences of sin in their life such as spiritual depression, darkness, gloom, anxiety, but ultimately, premature physical death (James 1:15).

Finally, when we realize that he has already warned of the deadly consequences of sin in James 1:14-15 his meaning is obvious: when a regenerate person puts off sin and receives the word implanted he is in a position to enjoy salvation anew. The kind of salvation the believer will enjoy here is Physical-Deliverance. This meaning is so obvious in James 5:19-20 it is hard to imagine why interpreters have ever come to another conclusion!

“Sin is deadly!” And contextually the kind of death in view in James 1:15 is physical and the kind of salvation in view in James 1:21 is also physical. It is the judgment of God on a believer who continues in sin.

Third, the phrase “save the soul” is never used of being “Saved from hell” anywhere in the Bible. The salvation of the soul is a common theme of the OT (Gen 19:17; 1 Sam 19:11; Jer 48:6; Ps 6:4; 7:2; 68:1; 72:13-14; 86:2; 109:31) and the NT (cf John 12:27; Matt 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:27) and it always refers to Physical-Salvation! It should be translated “save your lives” just as it is in several verses in the Septuagint. Every time the Septuagint uses the phrase “save your souls” or something similar it refers to Physical-Salvation. Three of these are very important.

Genesis 19:17 When they had brought them outside, one said, “Escape for your life! Do not look behind you, and do not stay anywhere in the valley; escape to the mountains, or you will be swept away.”

1 Samuel 19:11 Then Saul sent messengers to David’s house to watch him, in order to put him to death in the morning. But Michal, David’s wife, told him, saying, “If you do not save your life tonight, tomorrow you will be put to death.”

Jeremiah 48:6 “Flee, save your lives, That you may be like a juniper in the wilderness.

All who believe in Christ alone enjoy Salvation from the Penalty of Sin and this salvation is irreversible. But believer’s still need to be saved from the Power of Sin over their lives and essential to this is believing right doctrine, especially the essentials of the gospel.

The second line of evidence, James 5:19–20, is actually a practical illustration of 1:15: *Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.* According to James 1:18, brethren are those who God has regenerated by *the word of truth*. Thus, James 5:19 addresses believers.

The next pertinent phrase is *anyone among you wanders from the truth*. Can an unbeliever wander away from that which he has never believed? In the context *anyone* must be a believer, one of the *brethren* to whom James has now referred to three times as *my beloved brethren* and twelve times as *my brethren*.

The next phrase, *and someone turns him back*, decisively identifies the *anyone* of this verse as a fellow believer. Can an unbeliever be turned back to that which he has never believed? The very absurdity of such a proposition is easily envisioned in geographic terms: Unless a person has been in China, how can he wander away from it? Likewise, can a person be turned back to China, if he has never set foot in China? A person can neither wander away from nor turn back to China, if he has never been to China. James speaks of wandering *from the truth* and being returned to it. Remember that James 1:18 says that God brought believers forth (regeneration) by the *word of truth*. Indeed, James 5:19 speaks of an *anyone* who left the truth that regenerated him, and is now turned back by a *someone*. Within the immediate context both *anyone* and *someone* remain undefined except for their relationship to each other as regenerate *brethren* because they are children of God. Equally clear, the believer called *anyone* has wandered to the far country, far away from God, prior to *someone* turns him back. In light of the Genealogy of Death established in James 1:15, sin is maturing in the *anyone*, but not to the point that God has dealt with his sin through physical death, for indeed *someone turns him back*.

Verse 19 tells his fellow believer (*someone*) who has turned him (*anyone*) back to the truth that he has saved a life (*soul*) from sin unto death (*death*) and has covered or prevented *a multitude of sins*. Mature believers should have such a restorative ministry for fellow believers who stray from the truth (Galatians 6:1). It does not please God for James 1:15 to run its course. Left unchecked, sin will reach childbearing age in believers who wander in sin and carnality. Its offspring is the sin unto death.ⁱⁱ

James 5:20. This passage presents yet another use of σώζω with ἐκ where the meaning of the preposition is outside position. James writes, “He who turns a sinner from the error of his way *will save his soul from death*” (σώσει...ἐκ θανάτου). This sinner is defined in 5:19 as a brother who has strayed from the truth he once held (either doctrinal or moral) and who needs to be turned back (ἐπιστρέφω) to his former direction of life. The most natural way of understanding the context is to see this sinner as a true believer who has embraced erroneous doctrine or practice. The death in 5:20 then must be physical death. Wessel comments, “Since the NT teaches the security of the believer in Christ, it is best to take the reference to death as physical death.

The early church believed and taught that persistence in sin could cause premature physical death (cf. 1 Cor 11:30).³⁰ This interpretation is supported by the context of 5:15–16 where sin is linked with the loss of physical health.”ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Romans 6:23 is often used in gospel presentations as a part of the “Roman Road”. “*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” What most Christians don’t realize is that this verse has nothing to do with being saved from hell. Have you ever looked at the context in verse 22? “*But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life.*” They are already freed from sin, enslaved to God and eternal life is viewed as a future goal or outcome. Let’s not confuse what Paul is saying. Paul knows they are believers who possess eternal life but he also knows that there is a fuller enjoyment of it when we obey God and a final attainment of it when we are resurrected. That is why he says to believers, “*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*” Paul knows that when a believer sins wages are dealt out and those wages are death. Death here is temporal separation from God which result in loss of enjoyment of life and/or premature physical death. This has nothing to do with spiritual death, eternal separation from God in hell. Of course, the opposite of sinning is obeying and the opposite of death is eternal life which is a free gift. Here it is both the enjoyment of eternal life and the final attainment of eternal life at the resurrection.

ⁱⁱ Chafer Theological Seminary, *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal Volume 6* (Chafer Theological Seminary, 2000; 2002), 6:10-12.

ⁱⁱⁱDallas Theological Seminary, *Bibliotheca Sacra Volume 137* (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1980; 2002), 137:257. ³⁰ Walter W. Wessel, “The Epistle of James,” in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, eds. Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), p. 1439.

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