

# Search and Rescue

*Epistle of James*

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**Bible Text:** James 5:19-20  
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Turn with me in your Bibles to the fifth chapter of James. We come to the last two verses of this epistle that we've been looking at for some time and I think we'll be able to more than likely wrap up our exposition of James by next Sunday, Lord willing. It's been a real blessing to me to work through this book and very helpful in my own sanctification. It always is, the word of God is always, but sometimes it seems that books that have a special connection and just extraordinary application. I know that's been the way I've experienced this wonderful epistle.

We come now to verses 19 to 20 of James 5 and the title of the message this morning is "Search and Rescue: Every Christians Responsibility." Search and rescue, every Christians responsibility. I read a journal article this week about national parks. You know, American has some of the most wonderful national parks in the world, just the number of them, the various places that you can go. One of the interesting things, this journal article studied search and rescue in the national parks. This is just in the national parks, people who go to visit the national parks. Over a 16-year period, there were 65,000 search and rescue missions that had to be launched for people who were visiting the national parks. That's over 4,000 a year and of those, 4% of the people involved, there were fatalities, 4% of the people died; when their search and rescue operations were carried out, they were not successful 4% of the time. One of the things in reading a subsequent article about it was talking about, it was recruitment of national park rangers and one of the things it's talking about all the different responsibilities, you know, and why people want to be a park ranger. You know, they love the outdoors; they care about wildlife, you know, stop poaching; they care about just forests, you know, try to prevent forest fires, help people be responsible in their camping and things like that. But they said the one thing that is inescapable, if you are a park ranger, you will be regularly involved in search and rescue. You just need to be committed to that because that's gonna be a regular part of your job because people are gonna need to be rescued, searched for and rescued regularly. Nobody goes into a park thinking, "Hey, I hope I get to be in need of search and rescue," but it happens.

We come to a passage which actually emphasizes this same thing, that to be a Christian is like being a park ranger in a way, you may not have realized that you signed up for this when you became a follower of Jesus Christ but you did, that is to be committed to search

and rescue for other believers who wander from the path. That's what James ends his epistle with. James 5:19-20, let's read the text together.

19 My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, 20 let 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.

Let's pray together.

*Our Father, as we come to Your word, we are ever-mindful of our great need of grace, that You would give us the ministry of the Holy Spirit to illuminate the words that He inspired to make them light and life to us, and grant us understanding, grant us repentance, grant us faith and help us to walk out that faith in obedience for the glory of our wonderful Savior. We pray in His name. Amen.*

Search and rescue, every Christians responsibility. Interesting that James ends his letter this way. You know, James is one of the general epistles and the general epistles are called general because they're written to not specific churches or specific individuals. James wrote to a group of believers. We've noted as we've expounded this book that it was Jewish believers, he was writing to people that were of Jewish, you know, origin who had come to place their faith in Christ and were experiencing trials and difficulties and so he writes to them but they're scattered over an area. So he's not writing to a particular group in a particular place and so in the general epistles, sometimes you have a little more general opening and general closing, but most of the general epistles ends with some kind of benediction or blessing, "Peace be to you all." Peter, all the basically Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1 & 2 & 3 John, Jude, are general epistles and James stands out in that he doesn't end with, you know, "The Lord be with you. Grace be to you all. Greetings." He ends with another practical instruction. "While I've got ink left and I'm writing on this papyrus, I'm gonna keep instructing you in how to make your faith visible in your life." And so he ends with this urgent practical instruction and it flows, I think, really in a neat way from what we were looking at recently in those previous verses where we were talking about the power of prayer for spiritual healing, the healing of our souls and distress, James then comes now to say, "Listen, when people become weak in the faith and they even become so weak that they wander away, it's your job to go after them," and when you do that, you're doing something that is dear to the heart of God. Dear to the heart of your Savior who calls himself the Good Shepherd. Dear to the heart of God who calls himself Father and we his sons and daughters. So that's what we're called to be, we're called as Christians it's our responsibility, every Christian's responsibility to get involved in spiritual search and rescue when the need arises.

Now what I want us to do, we're gonna consider this text under five or six points but we're gonna look at probably the first three this morning to help us unpack the teaching of these two verses, so we're gonna probably look at three points this morning. The first is search and rescue, an inescapable reality or an unavoidable necessity. It's something that's going to have to be a part of your life the same way those park rangers were told in the manual that recruits them, "If you become a park ranger, you will regularly be

involved in search and rescue. You will be involved in life and death situations. You will experience times where we don't find the person or we find them when it's too late. Are you prepared for that?" James is saying this is a part, this is part and parcel of the Christian life. We're gonna see that he's saying search and rescue is not just for the spiritual leaders in the church, it's for every member. This is exactly consistent with what Jesus teaches in Matthew 18.

Every Christian is called to this and so it's an inescapable reality, an unavoidable necessity because as long as the church exists in a fallen world, true believers and professing believers will stray at times, and because professing believers stray, we are called to go after them. We see this in the first verse there in 19, "if any among you strays from the truth." The word "straying" means "to wander; to lose one's way." It's often translated "to be deceived" in the passive, that when you're made to wander because you're deceived. In fact, several times in the New Testament, including James 1:16, "Do not be deceived," translates the same verb. When James says that in chapter 1, verse 16, it's the same root verb here, "planao." It means "to wander; to be deceived and taken off the path so that you're wandering; you're roaming," and that's not cellphone lingo. You don't have that so much anymore. Remember that roaming? Things change so quickly now and I don't think my phone hasn't roamed in a long time. Praise the Lord, that's been brought back on-track, you know? No, anyway.

The word means "to be caused to wander; to be led into error; to be led astray; to be led from the right path." Just an interesting note, this particular word, "planao," is the root for our word "planet." It seems counter-intuitive at first, why would planet come from planaο? Well, when you look at the sky, planets are the wandering stars. They're the stars that seem to move in a very radically different way than the other stars. The other stars are fixed but the planets are moving, wandering.

So he says there's a very real possibility that among you, your brothers will stray, will wander from the truth, will leave the right path, and they will go into the error of his way, he will go into the error of his way. That word "error" in verse 20 is actually from "planaο" as well, it's the noun form and it means "a wandering; a straying; an error." So he emphasizes this danger with using this same word twice, to be straying, to be led astray. "Let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way," from the wandering of his way.

It's something that James says is going to be just a regular part of your experience as you gather together with the saints of God while you make your way, your pilgrimage through this life; that there will be those who come and then those who wander. In the text, he really has a sense in which he's warning all of us that it could be any of us who wander. The indefinite pronoun, "any," some translations says, "If anyone," I actually think it would be better translated, "If anyone among you strays from the truth. If anyone among you strays from the truth." He's talking about each individual among you could stray from the truth.

So watch. Be sober. Be vigilant. The Christian life is not a party cruise, it's a war. The verse I just quoted, "Be sober, be vigilant," is 1 Peter 5:8, "Be sober, be vigilant." Why? Why do you need to be sober and vigilant? Because, "Your adversary, the devil, is like a roaring lion seeking," not so that you can get a selfie with him, "that he may devour you." He's a roaring lion seeking to devour you, therefore, be sober, be vigilant. So the Christian life requires sobriety, it requires watchfulness. That's what James is saying. We watch over our own souls. We watch over each other's souls. That's the calling.

I mentioned Matthew 18. We'll turn there a little bit later, but Jesus there introduces, it's a familiar passage many times because we know that that's the passage where in verses 15 to 20 he lays out the process of church discipline. If your brother sins, go to him and rebuke him in private, and if he listens to you, you've won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, then take one or two others with you, second step of church discipline, so that the matter may be confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he doesn't listen to two or three of you, tell it to the church, step three, and then the church is to reach out to him and if he doesn't listen to the church, step four is to treat him as a pagan or a tax collector, that is, he won't listen to a believer who comes, he won't listen to a group of believers who come, he won't listen to the whole church coming after him. This, we don't know his soul for sure but treat him as a pagan or tax collector, that is, as an unbeliever. He's acting as an unbeliever. A believer doesn't normally do that and so he gives those steps of church discipline.

It's interesting in the context, though, verses 15 to 20 where he outlines those four steps, particularly 15 to 18, come in the flow of Matthew right after Jesus introduces this section by telling a story in verses 12 to 14, a parable. He says if a man has 100 sheep and one of them goes astray, and he says, basically telling this in an agrarian society where livestock is of such enormous value, they could hear it a little differently than we do, the value of an animal, an ox or a sheep was great. So he says, "If a man has 100 sheep and he loses one, isn't it obvious that anyone would put the 99 up and go after the one and search for him diligently until he finds him? And when he finds the one, he will rejoice more over the one than the 99 who did not go astray." Then he says, "If your brother sins, go after him." Do you see what he's doing? He's saying the shepherd cares about all 100 sheep, he cares about every one and so when one begins to stray going into sin, what are you to do? Get involved and help in being the hands and feet of the shepherd, the voice of the good shepherd going after the sheep, and James is just reminding us this is a part of the Christian life. So realize that you're gonna be involved in it. It's not all pleasant days. We know that, we know we suffer but relationally it's not all pleasantness, it's not just having, you know, wonderful conversations. It's being willing to go have the difficult conversation of going after someone who's committed to a way of sin and who doesn't want to hear what you have to say, and it's just there's no other way around it.

This is going to be a reality because we as believers, we as professing believers live in a sin-sick world. In fact, it's interesting in James's letter as he's unfolded it for us, he's told us of so many different perils but just chapter 4 alone really lays out what historically Christians have seen that the Bible defines our enemies. You know, I mentioned one of them earlier, the devil. He's like a roaring lion, right? So be sober, be vigilant. But there

are other reasons for sobriety and vigilance in the New Testament as well because we don't just have the devil as an enemy, we have the world. The world system is opposed to us. The world system is the values, the beliefs, the just propositional truths that undergird the way society thinks, and these things are governed and orchestrated ultimately by Satan, the god of this age, and they're energized by sin on the part of unbelievers so that the world system is seen as that which is arrayed against God. In fact, the word "cosmos, kosmos," means "an arrangement," and the idea is an army arranged and ordered in opposition, and that's one of the main ways the world, w-o-r-l-d, English word, taking "kosmos," the Greek word, one of the main ways that word is used in the New Testament. It's not always that, it also can be, "world" can mean different things in different places: the planet; it can also mean all the people on the planet, that is, "God so loved the world." But "world" often means the value system that is opposed to God and his rule that dominates society and that we are immersed in, that we are like a fish who can't get out of the water, you've got to stay in the water. We're in this sin-sick world.

So we have the world, we have the devil, but we also, those are two enemies but then the final enemy of our souls is the flesh, that is, the sin nature that still remains in any believer because the body has not yet been redeemed. So the presence of sin within us, "I find then this reality that evil is present within me, the one who wants to do good," Paul says in Romans 7, and if you don't walk by the Spirit, you will walk according to the flesh, Galatians 5:16. So the world, the flesh and the devil. The flesh is our own desires that are still connected to this physical body that's not yet redeemed. Our hearts still having this pull.

So we have these three enemies, we have the world around us, the devil directly adversary, and we have the enemy even within us, and if you understand that, it's urgent that we be sober and vigilant, and if you understand that, James says, it's obvious that there are going to be times where people stray because the goal of the world and the flesh and the devil is to separate. Just like when you watch those shows on tv, you know, the lions hunting. We were watching one the other day and Patti was like, "Do we have to watch this?" You know, if I flip by that, I find it just, you know, there's some kind of hunt going on, it's just like it's hard not to watch. I mean, I'm pulling for the animal to get away but, you know. I think if you don't pull for the animal to get away, you need to check your heart, what's going on with you at that moment. But anyway, I know the other animal's gotta eat too, okay. It's a dilemma in a fallen world we can't get around, but the animal had achieved its goal and it had taken the prey animal down and was beginning to kill it and she's like, "Can we please change the channel?" And I did change the channel and I was happy to change the channel, relatively happy to change the channel.

But what you see when you watch animals hunt whether it's lions, whether it's wild dogs, whether it's wolves, when they come up upon a herd, what is the goal? What is the immediate goal? It's always to separate an animal from the herd. That is the way you kill and the strategies are all about that. Separate an animal from the herd, a separated animal, even a separated water buffalo, massive animal, can be brought down, and that is Satan's strategy today, to separate from the herd, to get professors, professing believers to leave, to move away from the truth and from the people of the truth, and as long as we are in

this present age where the world, the flesh and the devil are our enemies, we will have to fight to keep ourselves and others together following our Shepherd. It's an inescapable reality. Search and rescue is gonna be an inescapable reality because there will be times where they do stray and we must go after them.

Secondly, search and rescue needs to be undertaken with a vital urgency. The second point is a vital urgency. James makes this emphatically clear with his language, "if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let 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." Will save his soul from death. The death of the soul. He says, "What are the stakes in this search and rescue operation?" Much higher than anything that happens in the national parks and praise God for people that do that, search and rescue. What a wonderful thing. Our first responders, how grateful we should be. These are expressions of God's kindness to us. But even more of greater import is spiritual search and rescue because here we are not talking about the loss of physical life, we are talking about the eternal death of the soul. That's what James is saying. He's saying that when you go after an erring brother, what is at stake is his eternal soul.

Now this raises some questions. Look what he says, "My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth." Who's he talking about? He's clearly talking about professing believers. I mean, he's used the phrase "my brethren" or "my beloved brethren" or "brethren" 14 times in this epistle. He's writing to Christians, to professing Christians and he says, "Listen, if anyone among you strays," so you're following the Lord and you find yourself, or you find another brother or sister straying, you go after them and if you don't succeed, what very well may be happening is the eternal destruction of their soul. Do you see the implication of that?

It raises a question to the thinking reader: is this saying that you can lose your salvation because you're talking about brothers, believers, who stray, and if you get them to come back, you've saved their soul? And if they don't, well, the implication is they will experience the death of the soul. The second death. How can this be? Can a believer lose his salvation? This is a very important doctrine and one which is so often misunderstood because of imbalanced ways of emphasizing what the Bible teaches. We must be biblical and let all of Scripture speak to every issue and so many in our day have embraced an error that sometimes called easy-believism, and that is and it often goes along with a phrase, "once saved, always saved." That's something I grew up with in the Southern Baptist churches that I was in as a young man. Once saved, always saved. Well, strictly speaking, I agree with that statement, once saved, always saved, the problem is it's an imbalanced emphasis and not the way the Bible talks about that issue. That's the problem. And for many people in our day, many people that you know and some of you even here today perhaps, you've embraced an understanding of salvation that is not biblical because once saved, always saved, often is interpreted to mean this or is explained to mean this: if you have had, this is the error now, I'm telling you what the error is but that is commonly held error among many well-intentioned people, if you have had an experience with Christ where you professed your faith, where you repented and placed your faith in Jesus and you remember it and, you know, you recall it, then you can know that you are always

saved. There are people who will counsel people who as they make a decision for Christ, in talking with someone which is important, when someone is burdened about their soul and they have the opportunity to talk to them and present the Gospel and explain it and you tell them, "Of course, pray and ask the Lord to save you. Express your repentance. Tell him." But they'll, sometimes after they've done that say something like this, "Never now ever doubt that you are saved. Write it in your Bible, you know, April 28, 2019, I placed my faith in Christ, and if you start doubting, go back and look at this." The problem with that is the Bible nowhere in any way ever encourages that kind of mindset. In fact, the Bible comes at it much much differently. The Bible does teach that we are saved at an instant in time, that you go from being dead in your sins to being made alive by Jesus Christ in a moment. You don't always know when that moment is, though. The Bible doesn't say you're always going to know when precisely that moment happened. You may, and praise God if you do, but you may not and more often it seems like you really don't know exactly when. It's over this season, someone says, that God really worked in my life and I came to understand the Gospel.

But it does say, the Bible does teach that you must be born again and that once you're born again, you can't be unborn again; that once you have eternal life abiding in you, by definition eternal life is eternal. That's true but the Bible presents a picture where profession of faith is not always genuine faith; that there are many who profess faith who don't have genuine faith. The Bible presents the reality that it's not just your experience. It presents this reality, your experience is not determinative. The fact that you had a very emotional conversion experience does not, is not the way God would tell you to look and say should you have assurance or not. The Bible nowhere encourages that.

Now that's, you know, what the prevailing natural, conventional wisdom in the church, the conventional wisdom in the church is wrong. It's just not biblical. The Bible says that true faith is granted by God and it happens at a point in time and when you believe, you're justified, you're declared righteous forever on the basis of what Jesus Christ has done and him alone, and it's not how much you want it or anything like that, it's that God gives you maybe a small measure of faith, maybe a large measure of faith, but your faith is really reaching out and trusting in Jesus Christ, the empty out-stretched hand of a beggar, that Luther said. That's all that you're doing is you're trusting in what he has done and what only he can give and you're surrendering to him. That's what trust means. Faith biblically is that. Not just to assent intellectually but to surrender one's self to, to cast one's self upon, and when that happens, you cannot lose that salvation but the issue is how do we know if that's happened? Not just because we're emotional. Not because we wrote something down in our Bibles. That's not what the Bible says. The Bible says you will know them by their fruits; that if there is true spiritual life, it will be manifest in fruit that will become visible over time.

So the Scripture would say, you know, look at the fruit of your life with others around you. Is there evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit in you? Are you convicted of your sins even now? Not just what then, even now when you're confronted with sin, are you convicted? Do you become humble under that conviction? That's an evidence that the Spirit is there because what does the Spirit do? He convicts the world of sin and of

righteousness. So love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, these are things that grow in the soil of the heart that's been truly redeemed. Little by little over time and still with a flesh and sin nature, yes, and it's a battle, it's three steps forward, two steps back, but over time is there progress in those areas, in different areas in your life, can you see that? That's how you know.

That's how you come to have true assurance, in fact, turn with me to Romans 8 for this. Look at a passage that, I think, speaks to this issue. Romans 8:16 is often quoted and actually another verse that is really quoted a lot is verse 14. We're looking at it for the purpose of verse 16, "The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God." That is, the Holy Spirit can give you an inner testimony so that you know and have assurance that is biblical and sound, the Holy Spirit does that. But how does that happen? What's he talking? Well, read it in context. It's not just some kind of, "I just know the Holy Spirit's telling me this." Let's look at the passage.

Romans 8:12 says, "So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh--for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live." He says, "Listen," he's exhorting them in chapter 6 to 8 particularly, to live out their faith. Now that they've been justified, this is what you need to do to live it out, to walk in holiness, and you're not to walk according to the flesh, that sin nature we were talking about earlier. You don't just yield to those desires. No, by the power of the Spirit you are to be putting to death those desires. You can't do it yourself. I can't do it myself. But by the power of the Spirit you can put to death the deeds of the body and he's saying, he's exhorting, now implicit in that, listen, implicit in that is that true believers can neglect this duty. True believers can neglect this duty and therefore struggle with sin in ways they really shouldn't be because they're being spiritually lazy, but if that's the case, expect that your assurance will be unsettled.

So he says, now let's continue reading. So he says, he's exhorting us, "Don't live according to the flesh," and he says essentially if you keep on living and all your life is living according to the flesh, when he says you must die, he's talking about you're going to hell. If you just give yourself to the flesh and there's no fight back, because if you belong to God, God's not gonna let you continue in that way, you must die. But if on the other hand by the Spirit you're putting to death the deeds of the body, you will know that you're gonna live forever.

This is, now that's the context for this other verse that's often misquoted, verse 14, "For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God." That verse is often lifted out of context and people will say, are you led by the Holy Spirit, they'll say and they mean, "I listen to the promptings of my heart and I go. I mean, I listen to the promptings in my heart of the Holy Spirit," that's what they'll say. "The Holy Spirit directs me. The Holy Spirit is telling me right now to do this. He's telling me right now to do that. He's telling you that you need to do that." He's not telling me that, is he telling you to tell me? Anyway.



So all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God. It's not saying that you follow inner promptings. It's not talking about that. It's not saying that those don't happen, I'm not arguing that, that the Spirit sometimes works that way. I'm not arguing that at all, the text just doesn't say that here. What does it mean to be led by the Spirit? It means to be led by the Spirit to put to death the deeds of the body. All who are being led by the Spirit to put to death the deeds of the body, they're the ones who are the sons of God. And going on from that, he says, "For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'" As you are putting off sin more and more, the Spirit's working in your life, he continues to even give you more assurance and calling out to God as your Father. It becomes more natural, Abba, Papa, Daddy. Then, "The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God." The idea is that testimony happens as you are growing in grace, progressing in your battle with sin, there will be moments where you realize, "Hey, I'm not responding the way I've always responded. I'm not flying off the handle like I do normally. Or I'm not thinking in the same thought pattern of anxiety or fear. It's changed. There's a qualitative difference," and that's where the Spirit is showing you you're being led by the Spirit out of sin and that's where the Spirit testifies to us, "It's because you're a child of God."

So that understanding in context, and so the Scripture says, yes, every true believer is eternally secure and cannot lose their salvation, but true believers, true salvation, true life, life always evidences itself. Something's alive and the way you know it, it grows and it bears the fruit appropriate to the life. Apple trees produce apples. Orange trees, oranges. Peach trees, peaches. And Christians, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Not all at one time. No, the Lord has a way, he has a way of dealing with you in one area and working on you and you have a breakthrough, and then another area, you just see how incredibly, "I can't, I'm not making any progress." Well, he's saying, "Let's get to work over here now." By the Spirit, by the power of the Spirit with the word, helping one another. Sanctification is a group project and if we're not working on it, we said before if you're not going forward, the Christian life is lived on an uphill with manual transmission. Google that if you're too young to know what manual transmission.... No, no, not right now. Later. Manual transmission is you're going uphill with a manual transmission car, if you take your foot off the brake, you're going backwards until you engage the engine. You must engage the engine. The clutch must come out and you must put the accelerator forward or you're going backwards, and if you're not going forward, you are going backwards. That's the Christian life.

So James is saying, "Listen, the stakes are incredibly high." If any of you is not going forward and you begin to go backwards and you're going farther and farther backwards, it's our job to go after him or her and it's a matter of ultimate urgency because the reality is that this is how false professors or those who have professed faith and haven't yet been genuine, are evidenced. John says something in 1 John 2:19, he says, "they went out from us for they were not of us." They fell away. In fact, really the balance of eternal security along with this biblical approach is really seen in just the next book over. If you turn over from James 5 to the previous book, Hebrews 3, it's one of the clearest verses to me that

shows eternal security in the right balance biblical light, and so often you have to go different passages to see it. Let me mention a few of just to make it so clear that salvation is eternal before we look at the Hebrews 3 passage.

John 10:25-27 says this that Jesus says that, 27 to 29, he says that if you believe in him, you're one of his sheep. That you cannot be snatched out of his hand. And he goes on to say you can't be snatched out of the Father's hand. You read back John 6, John 5, Jesus says things like this, "All that the Father has given Me will come to Me and it's His will that I lose none." So salvation is eternally secure because God is committed to it and Jesus is committed to it, and you can't fall out of Jesus' hand and you can't fall out of God's hand. He won't let you get out of his hand and nothing can snatch you out of his hand, including yourself.

Romans 8:29-30. There are five verbs there for those whom he foreknew, he also predestined; those whom he predestined, he also called; those whom he called, he also justified; those who he justified, he also glorified. What's significant about those five verbs, it describes the whole picture of salvation from eternity past when God foreknew and chose and loved, the idea of that word "foreknowledge" is "to love beforehand." So God loves his elect before the foundation of the world, those whom he foreknew, he also predestined. He governs their lives, every detail of their lives to bring them to faith at the right time. Those whom he predestined, he also called, the effectual calling of the Holy Spirit. Those whom he called, he also justified, declares righteous forever. Those who he justifies, he also glorifies. All five verbs that cover the whole span of salvation are in the same tense in Greek, the aorist tense. Completed action is the idea of the aorist tense and so he's saying those whom he foreknew and it's a group. Now see, those whom he foreknew, the group that he foreknew and he foreknew at a moment, he also, that same group he predestined. Those whom he foreknew, he predestined and he did it in a definitive complete way, the idea of the aorist. Those whom he predestined, he also called. The ones he foreknew is equal or equal to the ones he predestined, are equal to the ones he called. The set is exactly the same. Those whom he called, he also justified, declared righteous. They believe. They've been born again. They come into eternal life. And those whom he justified, he also glorified. So if you're in the first set, that set is a defined set that never loses a single party of the set. That's the picture, this chain of salvation in God's economy is secure. So if you are foreknown, you will be glorified. If you have been justified, you will be glorified, that is, given a new body like Jesus, presented before God holy, blameless, with great joy. Nothing can change that. The Bible clearly teaches that.

Well then, how do you make sense of these verses that we're gonna look at like Hebrews 3:12-14? It all fits together, we just have to think carefully with it and listen carefully. Hebrews 3:12, "Take care, brethren," this is just like what James is saying. He's talking to brethren. He's talking to professing Christians. "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God." And this is, again, remember these commands so often the "you" is plural and it is here. All of the verbs are plurals. These are commands to all of us and the idea is not just look out for yourself, look out for everyone around you. That's what he's saying. He's saying, "Take

care, brothers, as you look around, take care that there not be in any one of you an evil unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God." So he's saying there are professors who will have an evil unbelieving heart that fall away from the living God, therefore, work against it. Do everything you can to stop it. I think what he's saying is that a lot of professing believers are on their way to heaven, they think they're already saved but they're going to be. They haven't yet really come to the knowledge of the truth, but by continuing under the word and continuing with the people of God and continuing exhorting one another day after day, they're gonna come to faith and when you start to see them wander away, go after them.

So it's possible for those who profess faith to fall away but, listen to that, this is saying that it's possible for those who profess faith to fall away. It is saying that, yes. Let me ask you a follow-up question, though: is it saying that those who have been truly saved can fall away? And I'm going to say emphatically, no, and the text tells us that if we keep reading, verse 13. So based on the fact that we can have an evil unbelieving heart rise up in us and fall away, he says here's the exhortation, here's the command, "But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called 'Today,'" hear the urgency there. Encourage one another day after day as long as you can. Encourage one another, "so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." And the idea of the deceitfulness of sin relates to what we were talking about earlier, remember I said wander can be translated, "Do not be deceived." Sin is deceitful. The world is deceitful. The devil is a deceiver.

So help each other not to be deceived and here is where it all comes together in verse 14. I said he's saying it's possible for professing believers, he says it's possible for professing. Do you hear what I'm saying? Believers who profess faith, they say they're Christians, to fall away. Yes, he says that's possible but it's not possible for possessing Christians to fall away and look at verse 14, "For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end." How do you know if someone has truly been saved is answered, I think, in verse 14. How do you know, the author of Hebrews uses a different word here, how do you know if someone has truly been saved? How do you know if someone has become a partaker of Christ? Do you see that, that's the wording? "For we have become partakers of Christ," we have been truly saved, what does he say next? "If we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end." This is the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. The holy ones, the ones that have truly been born again persevere in faith. They hold on. And if they wander, which they can do, they will respond to the call of the Good Shepherd on the lips of other sheep that go after them, and if they don't respond to those first steps, second step, third step of church discipline, you are to conclude it appears they're not a believer and that gives you even greater urgency as you warn them. And even the fourth step of church discipline which declares them to be an unbeliever, that doesn't declare them to be an unbeliever, it declares them to be not a member of the church. We don't know their hearts but we are to tell them based on your fruit, Scripture tells us to conclude, to make a tentative conclusion about you, and our tentative conclusion is you appear to be an unbeliever. We worry for your soul. Repent and believe the Gospel. And all of that is done at even the fourth step as a way of reclaiming them to the faith.

In fact, when you look at Matthew 18:15-20, I mentioned it was 15-18 are the four steps, verses 19 and 20 in Matthew 18 he says some other things that one of the other verses that's sometimes misquoted, "Wherever two or three are gathered in My name, there I am in their midst." That's like the encouragement for small prayer meetings. You know, not many people showed up but wherever two or three are gathered, there I am in their midst. Well, God is happy when two or three do gather for prayer but that's not what that verse is talking about. I heard a guy say one time, "Good message, bad text," and what he meant was what you said was actually biblical, you just preached it from the wrong passage. That happens a lot like that, wherever two or three are gathered, there I am in their midst. That's not what that is saying. What it's saying is, Jesus is saying this, when he, the Good Shepherd, sees a sheep straying, he mobilizes his people and a brother goes after him and a brother, you know, exhorts him to come back, and if he doesn't listen, you take the next step of taking two or three with you and when you do that, one or two others with you so that two or three are going, and if he doesn't listen to them, then you tell it to the church, if he doesn't listen to the church, you treat him as a pagan or tax collector, what he's saying is when those two or three are there, when those two or three are there testifying to that wayward sinning believer, professing believer, when they are urging him back, Jesus says, "I am right there in their midst." Do you see that? The Lord Jesus Christ is personally present in the efforts of the saints who gather together to reclaim this imperiled professing believer, this sheep that is straying from the flock, this animal that is separating from the herd and is in danger, Jesus himself is there and that's why if you can neglect that kind of exhortation, it's hard to understand how you can be saved because you are directly rejecting Jesus himself as he speaks to you through his people.

So this is what James is talking about and what the author of Hebrews is talking about. There is great urgency because professing believers can fall away and if they are left alone and they continue on their way, the odds are overwhelmingly great that they are showing that they will spend eternity in hell, so what could be more important than that? You see, it changes the tone of how we go. This shows church discipline is not, it's not some kind of legalistic prideful thing, it is brokenhearted love expressed when it's done rightly. It's been often abused but you don't judge a good practice by the way people pervert it. No, you judge it by what Scripture says about it and Scripture says about church discipline when it's done rightly, it is Jesus Christ shepherding back wayward sheep. It's Jesus Christ loving his sheep and it's his people who love the Good Shepherd laying down their lives to bring back a believer, a professing believer into the fold.

So it's to be undertaken with vital urgency. We don't know their heart but we know based on the Scriptures and the warnings about the world and the flesh and the devil, the dangers are so great, the need is so urgent that we must go after them. This is one of those things when we really look at our hearts, I confess, you know, it's so easy not to see the stakes as they really are. It's easier to not think about it but that's not pleasing to God and that's a deadly spiritual lethargy and we need to ask God to break our hearts over what breaks his heart, and that's the good news, when you see that, you just go to Jesus and you say, "Lord, I am not seeing this the way I ought to. Make me see it the way You do.

Make my heart break over what breaks Your heart. Make my heart rejoice over what Your heart rejoices over."

I remember reading, I think it was Richard Baxter who said after he finished a wonderful sermon, he in that evening was praying and was, you know, meditation and prayer, talking to, meditation is where you take the Scriptures and kind of talk to yourself about it, and then prayer, of course, is when you're talking to God, and a lot of times it goes, I think, hand-in-hand. You take Scriptures and you say, "What's wrong with me?" And you're thinking about it and you're applying it to yourself and then, "Lord, help me." He said after this particularly effective powerful sermon, he said to the Lord, "How could I have preached that sermon without tears?" Those things should be a burden to us and we should pray for God's heart and that God by his word and his Spirit help us to be like him.

Let's pray together.

*Our Father, we come to You aware of our great need of grace ourselves as we were just saying, Lord, we confess how we don't see these things with the clarity and the reality that we so desperately need to. We don't understand the shortness of life, the nearness of eternity. We don't see yet what we ought to, Lord. We confess, wake us up, help us. May our hearts beat with Your heart. May You help us to be passionate, to realize that we all have this responsibility to care for one another and to help see one another home. What a beautiful picture that is, Lord, of just Your glory, that You call people Yourself and then You put us in relationship to help one another, to walk with one another, to shepherd one another. We all need shepherding. We all need help.*

*Father, we pray especially today for those here or those listening who are considering toying with sin and the world, listening to the enemy of their souls, who are being deceived, beginning to wander. Lord, let them see the urgency of this moment, that they even now would cry out to You in repentance. Let them see that the way that they are proceeding is a way which leads to death, eternal death, and let them run to Jesus Christ. Let them confess their sins to other believers as James has just told us in his previous passage, to find another believer or two that they can share their hearts and unburden their souls and have them pray for them and lock arms with them. And Father, let us be ready to listen to those who have that on their hearts. Let us be more sober and help us be vigilant. Lord, make Your people holy and earnest, lovers of souls so that we might be like You. What an amazing God, that You are holy, holy, holy and yet You are a lover of sinners and You make us clean. Lord Jesus, make us like You by Your grace and for Your glory, and we pray in Your name. Amen.*