

DAVID GIBSON

RADICALLY
WHOLE

*Gospel Healing for the
Divided Heart*



“David Gibson has given the church a guide to the book of James and the issues it raises that is biblical, pastoral, accessible, reliable, wise, and patient. While focusing on James, Gibson helpfully explores its great topics by drawing on all of Scripture, wise reading, and pastoral experience to lead the reader into the gospel-based wholeness that the Lord desires to form in his people.”

Dan Doriani, Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology,
Covenant Theological Seminary; Founder, Center for Faith and Work
St. Louis

“No one ever says, ‘When I grow up I want to be a hypocrite.’ Yet most of us would have to admit that there are areas in our lives that simply don’t line up with what we say we believe. In *Radically Whole*, David Gibson ably applies the straight-talk wisdom of the book of James to the areas of our lives that need to become conformed to the gospel we believe and the Savior we love.”

Nancy Guthrie, Bible teacher; author

“If Martin Luther had been granted a future look at the pages of David Gibson’s *Radically Whole* so that he could glimpse the overarching theme of the book of James and its symmetries (its ‘melodic line’), he would not have voiced his infamous conclusion that it was ‘a right strawy epistle’ but would have recognized James as a profoundly substantial letter consonant with the gospel of grace. Gibson’s penetrating exposition reveals that the grand unifying theme and purpose of James’s letter is the perfection—the singular wholeness—of God’s people. The book’s nine chapters are laced with gripping theological insights and life-giving applications that lead toward biblical wholeness. Gibson is a devoted, hands-on pastor, so *Radically Whole* sparkles with memorable analogies and aphorisms that help the reader understand and put to work its truths. And, in doing this, it focuses us on Jesus, the only man in history who not only knew God’s word but did it. This is a marvelous book, one that will be read, reread, underlined, and taken to heart—with enduring benefits.”

R. Kent Hughes, Senior Pastor Emeritus, College Church,
Wheaton, Illinois

“This excellent book gets right to the heart of James’s message and his method. It is beautifully written, and David’s exegetical skill and pastoral wisdom make it not only a compelling exposition of the letter but also a searching examination of the heart. I recommend it thoroughly for anyone who wants to understand James better, and to benefit spiritually in the process.”

Andy Gemmill, Director of the Pastors’ Training Course, Cornhill,
Scotland

“The purpose of your consultation at the James clinic is to help you toward full spiritual health. You already know that you will first meet a different physician, a Dr. Gibson, who has studied under Dr. James for many years. He is a somewhat younger man, but his familiarity with Dr. James’s inspired insights is impressive, as is the way he seems able to express the spirit and atmosphere of his teaching, as well as the central truth that Jesus Christ makes you whole. It is an idea that will recur in different ways as Dr. Gibson leads you, gently but firmly, through a comprehensive assessment process. And it begins with the first pages of *Radically Whole*. In its series of enriching consultations, David Gibson surefootedly provides the diagnosis, prescriptions, and prognosis we all need if we are to be made whole in Jesus Christ.”

Sinclair B. Ferguson, Chancellor’s Professor of Systematic Theology,
Reformed Theological Seminary; Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries

Radically Whole

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Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End

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Radically Whole

Gospel Healing for the Divided Heart

David Gibson

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*For
Trinity Church, Aberdeen*

Truth be told . . . the one thing in this world I want more than anything else is a great big crowbar, to jimmy myself open and take whatever creature that's sitting inside and shake it clean like a rug and then rinse it in a cold, clear lake . . . and then I want to put it under the sun to let it heal and dry and grow and sit and come to consciousness again with a clear and quiet mind.

DOUGLAS COUPLAND, MISS WYOMING

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Preface

COMPLETE. INTACT. UNBROKEN. UNDIVIDED. WHOLE.

I'm sure you'll agree that there is something very attractive about these words. Even just sitting there alone on the page without any context they manage to convey health and fullness. They depict how things are meant to be.

And I suspect that you, like me, would love these words to be true of you.

The Bible has different ways of describing what goes on inside us at the deepest level of our beings. There's the word *conscience*, for instance, the part of us that knows what it is to be either clean or dirty on the inside. A further inner world is conveyed by the word *heart*. It portrays the seat of our personalities and the sum total of our internal motivating engine.

I want to take you on a guided tour through one Bible book's penetrating analysis of another internal condition we each live with: "double-mindedness," as diagnosed in the epistle of James.

We know what it's like to be in two minds about something. We've all stood in a shop trying to choose between pairs of shoes, or coats, or new phones. We weigh up big decisions all the time in choosing between alternatives: a school, a house, a career. This

is normal. It's what it means to be finite creatures with incomplete knowledge of the ultimate good as we feel our way forward on the path of life.

But the fact that we are capable of going in more than one direction has a darker hue when it comes to our character. Everyone reading these lines will know what it is like to say and do things that can leave us on the other side of our words and actions utterly bewildered about where those choices came from. How could we have been so stupid, so selfish? What on earth made us speak like that? Creatures made in God's image we may be, but sin renders us absurd even to ourselves.

Digging deeper, we know that no one else can see what goes on inside our heads, and so we live with truths about us that only we can comprehend. We are the solitary observers of our inner closed-circuit TV. Sometimes this means there are things we are anxious to keep hidden. Often it means there are things we love which somehow say more about the real us than others can discern on the surface. Always it means there is a kind of fault line running through our personalities, a fracture at our core, which means that what we project is not the full story. We are so often less than who we wish we were.

According to the Bible, we are split down the middle.

So, I want to introduce you to James's painful-but-profound medicine for healing the divided heart. It is a lovingly prescribed course in wholeness. Not just "spiritual" wholeness, as if the spiritual side of our lives were separate from the physical, emotional, or relational aspects of who we are. The picture James paints is one that integrates every part of our lives, before God and in relationship with others. He portrays a Christian life of beauty and moral fitness, a cohesive uprightness to our character, that displays the

PREFACE

glory and goodness of God to those around us. It is profoundly attractive, and I want to captivate you as you gaze.

Make no mistake, James's words can cut like a knife. But he is only ever wounding in order to heal. This beautiful book in the Bible can put us together again and lead us part of the way back to who we were always meant to be.

See how God pulls us apart in order to make us whole.

Acknowledgments

THE EPISTLE OF JAMES has long been a perplexing book for me. On the one hand, James writes with a disarming simplicity of command and exhortation that is hard to sidestep or misunderstand; on the other, my logical mind has always struggled to perceive a distinctive wavelength or to trace a consistent argument from start to end. So, what you hold in your hands is my own attempt to wrestle with a portion of Holy Scripture which speaks a language we know, but in an accent that nevertheless sometimes leaves us unsure.

If there is any coherence to these pages—and if in God’s kindness you gain from them any light for the journey—then it is entirely down to an array of people who have wrestled with James before and alongside me, to outstanding commentaries, books, and sermons that instructed me on the way, and to friends and family who helped me as I wrote and thought.

First and foremost, I am indebted to Dr. Andy Gemmill and his fresh and illuminating work on James. I have heard him speak on this book in many different contexts over the years, and the architecture of my approach has been profoundly shaped by his clear thinking, his own personal and pastoral engagement with the

sharp end of James's words, and his gift for penetrating application. His is the blueprint; mine is the attempt to fill in and elaborate as many details as I can. I am very grateful for his constructive comments and preacher's eyes on my material.

My friend Ben Traynor preached James with me and opened up parts of it vividly for us at Trinity Church in Aberdeen. I am grateful for his permission to include some of his thinking here. Our staff team and elders enabled me to write, either by taking on parts of my work at different points or by offering feedback on earlier drafts. I am very grateful to Will Allan, Simon Barker, Nicola Fitch, and Drew Tulloch. Our ministry trainees and others worked with me on the questions for discussion and personal reflection that appear at the end of each chapter, and the whole book is the better for their input. My thanks to Alex Hanna, Hannah McEwan, Sam Moore, James Shrimpton, Sam Williams, and Struan Yarney. Nothing would ever have materialized without the skill and support of Eleanor Trotter and Caleb Woodbridge (IVP), and Justin Taylor and Anthony Gosling (Crossway). They all provided kind encouragement and wisdom at every step along the way.

As always, it was my own family who made everything possible. My wonderful parents picked up the slack more times than I can count, and certainly more than they will ever say. I owe thanks to my brother, Jonathan, for his excellent suggestions. My wife, Angela, and our children, Archie, Ella, Sam, and Lily, regularly went without me while I tried to write a bit here and there, and even packed me off to the remote Culfosie Cottage in Strathdon (courtesy of the kindness of Phil and Philippa Mason). I'd like to think it's a sacrifice they made to see the book finished, but I am quite sure life is just generally easier all round without me!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In this our eighteenth year in Aberdeen, I want to dedicate this book to the church family I am privileged to serve at Trinity. These precious brothers and sisters first heard what is printed here in sermon form. As always, they received these faltering efforts with humility and grace, and with patient and attentive listening. It is one of my great joys in our shared life to be seeking to grow in the grace of the Lord Jesus together, until we are made whole forever in a world made new. “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him” (James 1:12).

Introduction

Getting Your Bearings

You have to bite the hand that reads you.

TINA BROWN, QUOTED IN *THE WEEK*

WHY IS UNFAITHFULNESS such an undoing?

In a world of casual sex, and where pornography is readily available to be consumed on a massive scale, it remains a surprising fact that adultery is rather taboo. It is as though we have thrown a precious item under the bus (sex), but we have kept the price tag in our hearts (faithfulness). Something about breaking a promise and trashing a covenant still seems to stand out to everyone as being obviously damaging. In our culture's eyes it is not that sex with multiple partners is wrong per se. But if it happens in violation of the assurances of loyalty that we have given to someone else, then we seem to know deep inside that something has gone awry.

Sexual unfaithfulness can devastate like few things on earth. Our very identity is at stake in the delicate connection between what we promise with our words and what we do with our bodies, such that infidelity shatters trust between people and can destroy the

self-worth of each individual involved. It divides that which is not meant to be divided.

Unfaithfulness is such a catastrophic undoing because it strikes at the very heart of who we are meant to be as people: whole, committed, united to God, and united to others in faithful relationship. This is why, from start to finish, the Bible is the story of a marriage, God's marriage with his people, with human marriage given to us as a real, lived-out illustration of God's relationship with us.

The story of the first marriage in the Bible, in Genesis 2:24, is retold by the apostle Paul not only to instruct husbands and wives how to love each other but also to communicate how God loves us: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:31–32). It is simply astonishing that the physical, sexual intimacy of husband and wife is given to us as the analogy of how close we are to Jesus in his saving love for us. That act creates a oneness out of twoness. It's why Paul can say, "He who loves his wife loves himself" (Eph. 5:28). Just as Jesus loves us in such a profound way that we become members of his body, so too the joining of a man and woman in marriage means that there is no longer a "he" without a "she," or a "her" without a "him." Ray Ortlund notes that the original marriage of Adam and Eve was based on the fact that the woman was made "out of the very flesh of the man, so that the bond of marriage reunites what was originally and literally one flesh."¹ Two become one new whole, and they are to remain whole.

This reality of human love in marriage as an illustration of divine love in our union with Christ is why the Bible uses the severing of marriage in adultery as a powerful image of what we do to God in our sin. What God desires is our oneness with him in love, and

wholehearted obedience flowing from that love, but what we return to him instead, in our rebellion, is our love of someone or something else alongside or instead of him. The fundamental problem of the human condition is not primarily what we say or do; rather, it is who and what we love instead of God. He is the husband of his people (Isa. 54:5; Ezek. 16:8–14), but we are his adulterous people in return (Num. 15:39; Ps. 106:39; Ezek. 23:20).

In this book I suggest that the epistle of James shows this essence of our sin in crystal clear terms. James is deeply in tune with the Bible's story of God's own people prostituting themselves with other lovers. Instead of being wholly devoted lovers of God and fully integrated lovers of others, God's people can be so deeply divided that James will cry out, "You adulterous people!" (4:4). This is precisely what makes his letter so painful, and yet his clear sight is also, of course, what makes it so full of grace and hope. James has a beautiful conception of what life should be like when lived out of love for God and love for others, so his cutting words are merely flowing from his profound sense of how different things could be. He has such a clear vision of the good life that when he sees its ugly opposite, he cannot beat about the bush, but simply calls it out for what it is. We always think we want the truth, but actually *hearing* the truth is usually much more difficult.

The first thing to learn as we walk the road of becoming whole with James is that it involves him telling, and our accepting, the truth about ourselves.

In what follows, I work from the assumption that James is so preoccupied with the theme of wholeness that we will find it running through every single part of his letter like a golden thread. He is so taken with this idea that it is present at the level of a controlling motif and underlying argument, shaping everything,

even when he's not using specific words for wholeness or oneness. It is his governing and unifying theme.

Stand Back and See the Whole

Down through the years, many commentators and preachers have got lost in James, in part, I think, because they have moved through its various details and twists and turns without a clear sense of the entire epistle. The letter seems to bounce from one topic to another. Martin Luther accused James of “throwing things together chaotically.”² One minute we're reading about trials and testing (1:2–3), then we're thinking about the rich and the poor (1:9–10), then we're back to trials again (1:12). What is James getting at? In fact, James frustrated Luther so much that he went as far as to say that James is “a right strawy epistle” which “has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.”³ This was largely because of James's words “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (2:24). The apostle Paul teaches us justification by faith alone, and here is James flatly contradicting him, right? For Luther, James mangles Scripture.

This apparent clash between Paul and James has been taken by some to represent a conflict between “Pauline Christianity” and “Jewish Christianity.” In 1894, Adolf Jülicher called James “the least Christian book of the New Testament,” and more recently James Dunn regarded James as “the most Jewish, the most undistinctively Christian document in the New Testament.”⁴

All of this unease might sound strange to you. Many of us love James for its simplicity. It is such a practical letter, without too much tough theology to wrap our heads around. Maybe Romans is for the left-brained people who like linear logic, but James is for the right-brained artistic people who think in pictures. “If we put

bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also . . .” (James 3:3–4). It’s so vivid, and we understand it straight away.

At the outset, however, I need to say very clearly that Martin Luther was wrong. James is not worthless, and I want to show you why not. He does not contradict Paul, and we’re going to see how and why. It is also a wonderfully Christian book in its Jewishness. I agree with Richard Bauckham when he says in his superb study that James’s relationship to Judaism simply parallels Jesus’s relationship to Judaism.⁵ In other words, if James is “undistinctively Christian,” then so is Jesus himself. We will find some of the greatest riches in the book precisely because of their closeness to the teaching of the Lord Jesus, and it is he, of course, who is the true and ultimate fulfillment of Judaism’s oldest promises in the Scriptures and its greatest hopes for the Messiah and his new world order.

The opening verses suggest that James’s epistle was probably meant to be a round-robin letter to various churches in Asia Minor: “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.” This is obviously a reference to the twelve tribes of Israel, but it’s also clear that James is writing to those Jews who confess Jesus as the Messiah. Thus, they were very likely to be Jewish Christians who lived outside the land of promise, those who had been dispersed from their ancient religious landmarks, such as Jerusalem. Douglas Moo suggests that the fact that these Jewish believers in Jesus the Messiah had been forced to live away from their home country explains a “major characteristic of the readers of the letter: their poverty and oppressed condition.”⁶ At the same time, Moo notes, although “the situation of the church in the world provides one important context for the letter . . . the letter ultimately has much more to say about the problem of the world getting into the church.”⁷

That is a nice turn of phrase. Notice how it focuses our attention on the idea of mixing two things that should not be mixed (church and world). It directs us to the seriousness of James's tone and the pointed urgency with which he writes. So, I want to side very clearly with those who say that this is a wonderfully practical letter, but then I also want to ask, "Are we sitting comfortably?"

We are in for a very painful ride. Very painful indeed.

For James is a letter written to churches in danger of dying, churches that could become very sick. James knows that the recipients could embark on a one-way journey to the morgue. This means he will quickly blow out of the water any ideas we might have that this is a lovely letter full of "how-to" tips and nice, simple rules for life. Rather, the words in James are what you get when you go to the doctor and say, "Look, I've got this cough, but I'm sure it's nothing really." You're examined and scanned, and then a message arrives urging you to schedule an appointment. The doctor says to you: "Now about that cough: it's a symptom of a much bigger problem. I've got some bad news. You have a deadly disease."

I want to show you that James is like the best of physicians in three ways: he sees symptoms, he diagnoses the underlying disease, and he knows exactly which medicine we need to take.

Observe the Symptoms

James is writing to churches that could soon be on their deathbeds unless they take drastic action; they are fellowships containing men and women behaving badly. And when we look at a church that is going so badly wrong, it needs to serve as a warning to us too. It is the measure of God's kindness to us that sometimes he puts the cadaver on the slab, cuts it open, and tells us to have a look at

what killed this once living, breathing organism, so that we can take action to prevent it from happening to us too.

Maybe, as you read these lines, your fellowship is not the kind of church that is facing some of these drastic situations. Indeed, I hope your fellowship is healthy and thriving. If so, it is so important for us to listen to James's words now, before trouble comes. Good health is like that, isn't it? We don't really notice it until it's gone. It's what older people say as they succumb to frailty and weakness: "Oh, I wish I'd appreciated the health of my youth." It's what someone says after the terrible diagnosis: "I just didn't know I was living; my health was the best thing I had, and now it's gone." It's what we all said as the coronavirus pandemic turned our worlds upside down in 2020, and we realized how much we had been taking for granted, unthinkingly. Suddenly, 2019 was the best year that ever was.

But not everyone reading this will be on the mountaintop. It is possible that you have recently come through, or are still experiencing, the ugly and upsetting seasons that can roll into a church's life. They are so very common, and most fellowships face times of tension at some point. Maybe you are hurting right now from the reality of sin working its way through relationships you hold dear and harming a church family you have cherished for many years. You might need the Lord's help to forgive and to embark on a new path of spiritual wholeness. Some of us may need to be honest and admit that we've even played a part in things going off the rails.

Here are three symptoms of what is going wrong in the churches to whom James is writing.

Symptom 1: These Churches Are Speaking Angry Words

We get the first hint of angry words within the church very early on: "Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be

quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger” (James 1:19). This is amplified a few verses later: “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless” (1:26). The sense that a lot of problems in this letter revolve around our speech becomes crystal clear in chapter 3: “And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness” (3:6). James is writing because he knows it ought not to be so, but, in fact, it is so. For these believers, the tongue is a world of trouble.

Do you know what this is like? Fights, quarrels, and words that ignite and explode and harm and hurt? Of course you do.

I am grateful for the perceptive words of Andy Crouch that one of the great gifts of families at their best is that there we discover what fools we are. “No matter how big your house, it’s not big enough to hide your foolishness from people who live with you day after day.”⁸

For the Gibson family, foolishness always seems to reach epic proportions on Thursdays. I don’t know what it is about Thursdays. I call them TTT: Tongue-Torched Thursdays. Maybe it’s because, for me as a minister, by that point my work is beginning to funnel down toward Sunday, and I’m starting to feel the pressure of all the things left to be done before there’s any semblance of a coherent sermon. My wife has finished her part-time work for the National Health Service and is feeling tired. Our kids all seem to wake up cranky on Thursday mornings.

With alarming regularity, we manage to arrive at the breakfast table with short fuses and barely concealed irritation. Then someone casts a look deliberately designed to wind up someone else. There follows a condescending action, usually involving cereal bowls, spoons, and milk, or hairclips or lunch boxes—and out it comes,

sibling to sibling, husband to wife, parent to child. The words are sharp. The touch paper is lit. The dog is bemused. And we're off to the races. Again.

We all know what it's like to try to tame the tongue. But do you know what James is saying to us here? Don't bother. You won't do it. It can't be done. Now, don't get him wrong. James doesn't mean we don't need to change our speech, nor does he mean that speaking in these awful ways is an acceptable minor blip. No, his point is that soap in our mouths won't solve the real problem. The sinful speech is just a symptom; it's not the disease.

We'll soon come to the deeper problem, but first, two other symptoms.

Symptom 2: These Churches Are Drawing Ugly Lines

"My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory" (James 2:1). It's obvious from the opening verses of chapter 2 that James's first readers needed to be warned against drawing lines between those who had money and those who did not. They were honoring certain types of people and dishonoring others. There was an "in" crowd and an "out" crowd: an attraction to the people with means, wealth, and status and an overlooking of the poor, marginalized, and downtrodden. Haves and have nots.

This kind of demarcation within the walls of God's family is an ugly aberration and a downright denial of the gospel of grace: "Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?" (2:5).

So, this letter is going to ask us to reflect on the price tags we attach to people as we experience church together. It is going to

be an uncomfortable examination of whether our whole way of assigning value and worth is actually distinct from the world in which we live or merely an uncritical aping of it.

Symptom 3: These Churches Are Not Doing Good Works

“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?” (James 2:14).

Here is why I think the letter of James is so challenging for the evangelical church. James is writing to a church that has faith, one that loves the gospel. The theology on offer in its worship services is orthodox, the doctrinal precision second to none. This is a church that loves preaching. Its members love the Bible. Yes, they love hearing it, *but they don't do what it says* (1:22). And so James writes with a very stark prognosis indeed: no good works, then actually no living faith. You're dead. “For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead” (2:26).

When I was little and visited the doctor, I remember being asked to stick out my tongue. Here James is essentially doing the exam: “Let me take a good look at you. Let me examine you and listen to you.” And what he hears are explosive words; what he sees are ugly lines and an absence of good deeds.

So, those are the symptoms. What's the cure?

Please observe what James *doesn't* say. He never says that the cure is simply this: speak good words, don't draw lines, and do good deeds.

No. “Rather,” says James, in effect, “hop off the table and come and take a seat, for I need to speak to you. Let's park your symptoms. They're not your real problem. They have triggered one huge warning light. You have a deadly disease.”

Diagnose the Disease

See if you can spot the diagnosis:

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. (James 1:5–8)

The reason why I'm using the medical term *diagnosis* is that James's analysis of the human condition probes beneath the surface to the deepest motivating factors of the human psyche. His judgment is that there is a terrible affliction called double-mindedness (1:8). The Greek word is *dipsychos*, which literally means "two-souled." In fact, it seems to be a word that James himself has invented. It's his own inspired attempt to convey the terrible opposite of what we are meant to be as children of God: wholehearted, consistent, shot through with integrity. As Moo observes, it's James's way of expressing what in other places the Bible considers the tragedy of the "divided heart."

King David says,

Everyone utters lies to his neighbor;
with flattering lips and a double heart they speak. (Ps. 12:2)

This inner duplicity is why Solomon has to entreat the people in his benediction at the dedication of the temple: "Let your heart therefore

be *wholly* true to the LORD our God, walking in his statutes and keeping his commandments, as at this day” (1 Kings 8:61). Back in the Psalms again, David petitions God with the same request:

May integrity and uprightness preserve me,
for I wait for you. (Ps. 25:21)

We discover that

blessed are those who keep his testimonies,
who seek him with their *whole* heart. (Ps. 119:2)

Now, if you’re reading closely, you will have noticed that James uses the word “double-*minded*,” but I have crossed over into speaking about the *heart*. This is key to realizing that James is working not only with discrete words as he tackles the problem of wholeness but also with a profound understanding of the human condition which is deeply immersed in the storyline of the Bible. For, in Scripture, *heart* is the word for the operational headquarters of the human being. Says Craig Troxel, “Everything we think, desire, choose, and live out is generated from this one ‘controlling source’ and is governed from this one point.”¹⁰ Notice the connections in that quotation between mind, desire, and will. Each flows from one directing stream: the heart.

In his wonderful book *With All Your Heart*, Troxel unpacks a rich seam of Puritan theology that operated with a threefold cardiology of mind, desires, and will. He argues that in the Bible the heart is presented

as a trinity of spiritual functions. . . . The heart includes what we *know* (our knowledge, thoughts, intentions, ideas, meditation,

memory, imagination), what we *love* (what we want, seek, feel, yearn for), and what we *choose* (whether we will resist or submit, whether we will be weak or strong, whether we will say yes or no).¹¹

Very simply, this means that James is able to see doubleness across the full panoply of our human condition: in how we think, in whom we love, and in what we do. It comes out in whom we speak to and how we speak to them; it surfaces in a theological confession that is undermined by our lack of practical outworking; it is present in our impatience in suffering as we reveal our inability to wait for the Lord, the righteous Judge. As Richard Bauckham says, the reason why the prayers of the double-minded are not answered is that such people “vacillate between trusting God and looking elsewhere. They do not truly, wholeheartedly, want what they ask of God.”¹²

So, I simply want us now to take in James’s overall idea that it is possible to have a *twoness* inside us corrupting our oneness. We know that living with two of you can land you on the psychiatrist’s couch; as she listens to you describe yourself, and you are eventually given the diagnosis of split personality. James is saying that our deepest problem, the well from which all the symptoms flow, is a spiritual split personality: we are divided on the *inside*, which is what leads us to cause divisions on the *outside*.

So, a divided heart leads to divided actions.¹³

Living as Two

Just look at how doubleness inside us takes shape outside us:

- “But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (James 1:22). We can be divided between

listening and acting. We love to hear, but we don't find it so easy to do. We split them off one from the other. We like being in church and we love the sermon, but by Tuesday we're struggling (again) to do what God told us to do. Why?

- “My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory” (2:1). James is probing a very profound reason why we honor the rich over the poor. It's because one part of us loves the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, and another part of us loves the glory of wealth, riches, and prestige. James is calling his readers not to be divided in our glory gaze.
- “If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?” (2:15–16). We divide faith and good works, thinking we can separate them and safely have one without the presence of the other. Why?
- “From the same mouth come blessing and cursing” (3:10). Notice that the dividing line splits our mouth. Our speech is not united: it is double in form and content.

The World in the Church

We can see, then, that this letter is all about the problem of doubleness where God intends there to be oneness. Its main thesis is that there is no point ever trying to fix the tongue or to change the lines we draw without changing the heart, the source of it all. We will never change how we relate to a poor person and a rich person in the same room unless we realize that the real issue is not money but the evil inside us: “Have you not then

made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?” (James 2:4).

Evil *thoughts* and selfish *desires* are our real problem, the kind willing even to ignore the damage done to the whole body if we can stand to benefit personally. So, James is doing more than giving us a sterile medical term for our problem. In fact, looping back to the start, he calls it adultery, the ultimate form of doubleness, a twisted twoness where there is meant to be beautiful oneness: “You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?” (4:4).

Imagine a young couple just returned from their honeymoon. They are starting their life together, a new adventure, and the doorbell rings. They open it to find an old flame of the husband from years ago. “Hi,” she says. “I thought I’d come and live with you for a few years!”

Before the bride can express her astonishment, the husband bounds along, hugs the woman, and exclaims, “This is going to be so much fun! One big happy family!”

Oh, dear! Why is the bride weeping? Because of jealousy. Righteous jealousy. It’s because of real love, true love. “Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, ‘He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us?’” (4:5). Verses like this show us that God is a God of wholeness, of oneness. He hates that things meant to be whole become separate, because this goes against who he is. Remember James’s words: “For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways” (1:7–8). Such a person cannot receive anything from the Lord, precisely because the Lord himself is not divided. The Lord Jesus was the ultimate whole human being, the one true man whose heart was wholly true

to his heavenly Father. Integrity and uprightness preserved him in all that he did; he kept each and every one of God's statutes and commandments. Without fail, he sought God with his whole heart (John 6:38; Heb. 10:5–7).

We will return to the significance of who Jesus is in contrast to who we are. But for now, we simply need to grasp the stinging charge that James is laying at the door of the first hearers: you like someone else in bed; you like being married to the world as well. The world likes the rich over the poor; it quarrels, fights, and murders; it harbors bitter jealousy and selfish ambition.

And when God's people live like that, it shows we are in bed with the world, two-faced in our loves.

So, What Do You Really Believe?

Here is where I find the message of James so penetrating. He is basically saying to us, “The quarreling, the unbridled tongue, the discrimination in our midst—and there are many other symptoms of sickness—reveal that we're happy to cheat on God.”

“Yes, Lord, I'm all for you!” we say. Then out come the words, the actions, and the decisions that show I am also all for *me*.

This is a most painful letter. As my friend Andy Gemmill has put it, “James is the kind of physician who can look at our speech and our living and the way we relate to each other, and he can read off those actions what we really believe about God.”¹⁴

Just like a doctor can look at the rash, hear the cough, then listen to the erratic breathing and say, “I'm afraid there's actually a very big problem here,” so it's as if James is saying: “Give me a few months among you as a church family. Let me observe and listen. And I will tell you whom you love.” He elaborates: “Let me just watch how you treat your friends and speak to your church

family and your children, and I will tell you where your heart is. Let me watch you welcome the outsider, and I will tell you what you believe about God.” It’s that sharp.

So, imagine you’re doing a church building project (as we are at Trinity at the time of writing), and you’re short of money. A poor man and a rich man arrive in your congregation. After church, James gently takes you aside and points out how he noticed that you spent a lot more time talking to the rich man than to the poor man. Why was that? As you stammer for an answer, James essentially says, “I’ll tell you why: it’s because you don’t believe that God has chosen the poor in the world to be heirs of the kingdom (see 2:5). You don’t really believe that.” As you falter again, James says, “I will show you my faith by my works” (2:18). For what does it profit a church to gain a whole new building, yet forfeit its own soul?

If all these symptoms point to a deadly disease, then, thankfully, all is not lost. Help is at hand, and it comes from God himself, the great physician.

Receive the Medicine

Churches drop dead, eventually, after years of saying, “That’s just the way it is.” If you want to kill the gospel in your home, with your kids, in your marriage, you kill it by saying: “Oh well, that’s just Thursdays. We’re all a bit tired. That’s just the way it goes, I suppose.”

In fact, the person whose manner is brusque and whose tongue is like a knife needs to change. We should never, as people who love the gospel, say, “That’s just the way it is.” No, the symptoms are a sign that something is terribly wrong. The tongue can do immense damage. The lack of good works can show your faith to be dead.

So, what do we do with the double mind, the divided heart, the fractured self?

The answer is that there is medicine we can take, called God's grace. "But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble'" (James 4:6). The medicine is repentance: regular, daily, heartfelt turning around and running back to God again. It is learning a new language. We stop saying, "It's just Thursdays," and we start saying, "It's just sin."

Isn't that what James is doing here? "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded" (4:8). James speaks plainly. He doesn't use all the tidy euphemisms we use to justify ourselves. Sin is why we honor the rich over the poor, why we speak the way we do, why we can ask others how they are with no intention of ever meeting their needs.

Healing for Fractured Hearts

James teaches us to learn to dig deeper with God. Learn to ask, "What's going on in my heart?" If the language of sin, grace, and forgiveness is not the regular currency of your dinner table, your pillow talk, and your coffee time, and if there are brothers and sisters in your church who have wronged you, or have been wronged by you, and you are not keeping short accounts with one another, let James help.

You heal the divided heart with the gospel. With grace. When was the last time you asked someone to forgive you, the last time you repented out loud to God for your specific thoughts, words, or actions? That's how we measure whether or not we're taking the medicine. And we can start now, wherever we are.

God is so tender with us, so merciful, so patient. Think how jilted lovers act. When someone discovers adultery, what happens?

There's always anger, and then there's the cold shoulder and the bitter exclusion. The days of welcome, warmth, and intimacy are over. Almost inevitably, separation is followed by divorce. But what does God do? "You adulterous people! . . . Draw near to God" (4:4, 8)! Imagine being cheated on and, in response, gently wooing the one who jilted you by saying, "Come close"! James wants us to meet this God afresh.

The grace of God is sweet, sweet medicine. We're going to explore its incredible depths and glorious riches. Grace can make the wounded whole. It can heal the divided heart.

Questions for Discussion or Personal Reflection

1. What are your impressions of the book of James so far?
2. What is meant by the term "double-minded"? Explain it in your own words.
3. Are you able to diagnose the symptoms of your divided heart?
4. How does God calling us to "draw near" give us hope?
5. As you begin this book, what are you most hoping to receive from the letter of James?

Perfection

If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.

ANTONIE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY, *THE WISDOM OF THE SANDS*

¹James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,
To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion:
Greetings.

²Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

⁵If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. ⁶But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

⁹Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, ¹⁰and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. ¹¹For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the

grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

¹² Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. ¹³ Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. ¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

¹⁶ Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. ¹⁷ Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. ¹⁸ Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

JAMES 1:1-18

I'M TOLD THAT, every summer, the residents of Oxford and Cambridge get a visual treat. They observe tourists trying to board punts on their famous rivers. And nearly always they witness some poor, unsuspecting person doing the splits. It turns out that boarding a boat from dry land is more difficult than many suspect. One leg stays and the other leg goes, and the result is both painful and undignified.

This is James's mental picture of the Christians he is writing to. He can see them with one foot firmly planted in the Bible and with God. But he can also see them with the other foot still touching

down in the world, with its ways of thinking, speaking, and acting. And a foot in two totally different domains is no basis for anything stable or whole.

All of Me for All of You

Richard Bauckham comments that in this opening section of his letter, James intends “to highlight the overarching theme of the whole work: perfection.”¹ James 1:1–18 is a collection of wisdom sayings, or aphorisms, laid out, it seems, in almost random order. In fact, James is simply highlighting virtually every topic that he will go on to expound in greater detail in the rest of his letter. And he begins by telling us there’s a way for us to be “perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (1:4).

How I would love to be perfect! It’s a tantalizing goal for every Christian, and it would be amazing to get there. My wife would love it if I were perfect. My kids would be over the moon. Think how much everyone around me would benefit if I were the complete package, the real deal, in every single area of life. I believe that James begins his letter in this way because, right from the start, he is showing us the opposite of being double-minded. Being “perfect” is his word for being whole.

“Perfect” is translated from the Greek word *teleios*, and in fact it appears twice in verse 4: “And let steadfastness have its *full* [*perfect*] effect, that you may be *perfect*.” James reinforces this with a very similar word, *holoklēros*, “complete,” and with the extra phrase “lacking in nothing” (1:4). Bauckham points out that the *teleios* word group occurs seven times in James; surely this is not accidental, with seven being the number of perfection or completeness in the Jewish Bible. Indeed, in 3:17, James will sum up the “wisdom from above” in seven attributes.² As well

as appearing twice in 1:4, *teleios* comes again in 1:17, 25; 2:8, 22; and 3:2.

When we struggle to find coherent ordering in James, we may be looking for the wrong thing: the logical flow of an argument you'd find in the apostle Paul's writings and other epistles. But, as I suggested earlier, not finding this in James doesn't mean James is random or illogical. On the contrary, what he is doing instead is presenting us with a worldview deeply immersed in the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament Scriptures, which was itself profoundly informed by God's giving of the law to his people. James has a vision of what God intends for his people—perfection—and every part of his letter is related to this intention. Says Bauckham, "Careful study shows that this is not just one important theme, but the overarching theme of the whole letter, encompassing all the other major concerns."³

So, what does James mean by perfection?

Way back in time, when the children of Israel stood on the edge of the promised land, ready to receive their marching orders from Moses, he instructed them to "therefore choose life" (Deut. 30:19). Moses preached a sermon telling God's people they would have more from his hand than they had ever dreamed, and there was a simple way to receive everything he was willing to give. It was a beautiful sermon, known as the *Shema*: "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deut. 6:4). That was point one of the sermon. The Lord is not divided. Many in my congregation wish my sermon points were as brief or as clear as that.

And what comes next in the sermon? Point two: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deut. 6:5). The Lord is not divided, and so you should not be divided either. Love him with all of you,

love him wholly and completely.⁴ As Scott Redd puts it: “God’s character is whole, pure, full, rich, and simple, and it demands a response of whole, pure, full, rich, and simple love. Whether public or private, individual or corporate, spiritual or carnal, God’s people are to be simply and wholly in love with Him.”⁵

Remember that this is a letter to Jewish Christians now scattered throughout the world. They cherished their Hebrew Scriptures and knew the law of Moses inside out. They also knew that because God is one, what he loves is oneness. Yet, as we’ve seen, James is writing to churches displaying in all their outward factions their inward fractures. Instead of whole hearts, they have divided hearts. They are not yet perfect or complete. Make no mistake, they could say: “I love you, Lord; I really do. I’ve been born again. I have a love for you that I never used to have. I love your word. I love your law. I love your people. But truth be told, I also still love me. *My* kingdom come. *My* will be done. I am split, double-minded.”

So, here we are at the start of this wonderful, stinging, antiseptic letter that is like antibiotics being pumped into our spiritual system to seek out the disease and kill it at its root. Right away James is showing us that his aim is God’s aim for his children: perfection. Douglas Moo states, “Nothing less than complete moral integrity will ultimately satisfy the God who is himself holy and righteous, completely set apart from sin.”⁶

The Lord Jesus himself told us, “You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). Mature. Complete. Spiritually whole; our splitness refined into oneness. The fact that the Lord Jesus himself expressed the same idea here ties James into the bigger picture of the Bible’s storyline. In his brilliant study of the Sermon on the Mount, Jonathan Pennington argues that one of the key ideas—if not *the* key idea—that

make the sermon hang together is “wholeness,” “completeness,” or “singular devotion.”⁷ When Jesus says that we must be whole or complete as our heavenly Father is whole and complete (Matt. 5:48), this comes after Jesus has outlined six ways in which a “greater righteousness” than that of the scribes and the Pharisees is required in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. The Pharisees are hypocrites because, says Pennington, “they are not unified in heart and action; they actually *do* the right things, but they are not the right kind of people because their hearts are wrong. . . . They are not ‘pure in heart’ and therefore they cannot see God (Matt. 5:8).”⁸

Such unity of heart and action is most perfectly embodied, of course, in the Lord Jesus himself, who came not to abolish the law that called for singular perfection, but rather to fulfill it (Matt. 5:17). He is the true, perfect, whole, faithful Israelite and, as such, the perfect, whole, and faithful exemplary man. We will see later on that James calls him “the Lord of glory” (2:1). And it is this title for the Lord Jesus that grounds his deeply whole-Bible perspective of the undivided heart, whereby a person gives himself or herself to God, holding nothing back. James has a wonderful vision of human flourishing, flowing from singular devotion to God in his law and his grace.

Three Steps toward Wholeness

Here are three things James tell us to do if we want to be whole.

Think Clearly

If the goal is “that you may be perfect and complete” (James 1:4), let James work backward from that point and show us how we get there. Wholeness is where God is taking us, but how do we reach

it? “Let steadfastness have its full effect” (1:4). But how do we achieve steadfastness? We get it by “the testing of [our] faith” (1:3).

So, we can trace the steps along the way to the perfection goal. When we meet “trials of various kinds” (1:2), God is testing our faith to produce steadfastness, and that steadfastness will then lead to wholeness and completeness.

I believe this is one of the big surprises of James’s letter. And it’s a bit unwelcome too, if we’re honest. Just as in the introduction we saw that there is no wholeness without loving truth telling, so here we learn there is no wholeness without soreness. There is no perfection and completeness without suffering trials of various kinds. You may be so used to this idea as a Christian that you haven’t paused as you have read the text of James simply to reflect on its strangeness: the road to perfection is the path of pain.

Again, we should consider how closely James’s teaching aligns with that of the Lord Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus presents a vision of human wholeness and flourishing that is profoundly paradoxical in nature. It is the poor in spirit, the mourning, the meek, the hungry and thirsty who stand to gain the kingdom and life with God himself. This is what Pennington calls “a rich reservoir of ‘black gold.’ It is a divine gold of priceless worth, but it appears to be only in darkness.” Jesus commends states of being that seem to be profoundly *non*-flourishing in nature.⁹

James shares this perspective: God tests your faith to produce steadfastness, in order to make you perfect and complete. In fact, more than this, again in words similar to those of Jesus in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:2–11), James promises an encounter with God on the other side of suffering that is truly beautiful: “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the

test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him” (1:12).

But if we want to reach that point whole and complete, and if we want to receive the crown of life at the end of time, then we need to keep working even further backward, according to the logic of James’s argument. For he gives a very significant command in 1:2 which tells us how to view the fiery trials that lead to steadfastness, and which, in turn, lead to perfection. And we won’t reach any of those stages if we don’t do this first: “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds” (1:2). We have worked all the way back to the very start of his argument, and here is the key command that underpins everything.

If you’re like me, I suspect that when trials land in your lap unexpectedly, one of the first things you do is stop thinking and start feeling. But here is James telling us that we need to *think* clearly about our trials. We need to engage our minds. The first thing to do if we want to reach the goal is to think. Another way of saying it is, “Consider it all joy.” Reckon it. We are to use clear, rational thought in order to understand how it could be joyful.

Notice that James doesn’t say, “*Feel* it all joy.” It can happen, but it’s rare in my experience for tears to be joyful. Nor does James say, “Consider it *happiness*” when you meet trials. There’s a huge difference between happiness and joy. Happiness is circumstantial; it’s here one moment and gone the next. But joy is the deep, settled knowledge that God is in this, that nothing he sends me—nothing!—is outside his care and his loving purposes for me.

Notice, too, that you are to count it all joy *when* you meet trials. When, not if. It is certain that if we live long enough in this world, we will suffer. We will be bereaved or cause others to be bereaved. We will enter circumstances that will have the ability to crush us,

and yet, says James, there is a way of considering joy in those trials, and it is to realize that God is doing something, working to make us whole.

C. S. Lewis gives the most wonderful illustration of how and why God works like this:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you understand what he is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is he up to? The explanation is that he is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage; but he is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it himself.

. . . If we let him . . . he will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a . . . dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly . . . his own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful; but that is what we are in for. Nothing less.¹⁰

If the end product is worth having, then the pain along the way is worth enduring. But it's only if we want to be whole, to have every inner fracture healed, if we want to be mature and perfect and complete, that we will we count trials "all joy" (1:2).

Take the athlete who is training, running, pushing for the victor's crown, like the "crown of life" in 1:12. That athlete who wants to turn a dream into reality counts it a joy to train, even if there is pain in the sweat and the tears, because he or she knows what this testing of mental and physical strength is going to achieve. Indeed, the word "steadfastness" in 1:4 takes us directly to the gym because it means "remaining under" something successfully. The bodybuilder remains under the weight of the bench press, facing resistance. This is James's way of saying that just as faith pushes back against the heavy burden, just as the muscle grows under the strain, so faith grows under the trial. But you do that—you keep sweating, pushing, hanging in there—only if you want the end product of the perfect spiritual body.

We know that some of the very best things emerge only after the most painful of experiences. James believes that the essence of Christian wholeness is based on this same principle, as God refines, purifies, tests, and perfects his people.

It's very possible that as you are reading these lines, you are suffering and carrying a heavy load. Maybe others close to you know about it and are taking the strain with you; maybe no one else at all knows, and the sheer loneliness is adding insult to injury. Some of us are meeting the trial of loneliness head-on. For others it's the trial of unemployment, of unfulfilled sexual longing, of bereavement, of long-term sickness, or of disappointment. It's the trial of old age: body creaking, heart aching, friends departing. It's the trial of having to move out of your home in your later years. It's the trial of difficult, tedious, mind-numbing employment. Your faith is being tested in a difficult marriage. Or your children have needs you don't know how to meet. There's the trial of midlife crisis, of middle-aged depression. Or your sexuality is

uncertain, your gender identity confusing, and you don't know where to turn.

Whether right now or at some other point in our lives, we will face serious trials. Something will turn up the temperature, and so, like a precious metal being tested in the heat, our faith in God will enter the crucible.

In his commentary on James, R. Kent Hughes cites a beautiful illustration by Richard Seume:

Life on earth would not be worth much if every source of irritation were removed. Yet most of us rebel against the things that irritate us, and count as a heavy loss what ought to be rich gain. We are told that the oyster is wiser: that when an irritating object, like a bit of sand, gets under the "mantle" of his shell, he simply covers it with the most precious part of his being and makes of it a pearl. The irritation that it was causing is stopped by encrusting it with the pearly formation. A true pearl is therefore simply a victory over irritation. Every irritation that gets into our lives today is an invitation to pearl culture. The more irritations the devil flings at us, the more pearls we may have. We need only to welcome them and cover them completely with love, that most precious part of us, and the irritation will be smothered out as the pearl comes into being. What a store of pearls we may have, if we will!¹¹

James is writing about God's pearl culture. A pearl is a mature saint, not lacking anything, a perfect and complete believer. But some of us are just starting to get the sand in the eye. We're rubbing it and rubbing it; we want it out. But God is just leaving it there, and so we're rubbing even more furiously. We're wondering where God is

and what he is doing, and James is coming alongside here to teach us how God makes pearls. We need to smother the irritation with the most precious part of us, with clear-eyed thinking.

My prayer as you read this is that you might begin to see what God is doing, and what he might be killing in you, and what parts of you he is knocking about in order to put your divided soul back together.

Or you might be a pearl already. I'm sure many of you are. I don't know what difficulties God has already brought you through.

But it's also possible that you haven't yet had much grit in your eyes; your life has gone with the flow so far. Can I encourage you to look around your church with fresh eyes and get to know some pearls? Spend time with them. If you don't know who they are, ask your pastor to introduce you, and learn firsthand how God did some of his deepest work in their lives when no one else was looking.

It is a great mistake to think that when we get it all together, our trials will somehow lessen. That if we get the girl, find the job, pass the exam, or recover from the illness, we will somehow have arrived. No, there are trials of various kinds right until we cross the finish line, until the crown of life is placed on our heads by the Lord Jesus.

Do we want to be whole? Do we long to love God with all our hearts and souls and strength more than anything else in all the world? This question really matters, because if we don't, we will not endure the trials when they come. Trials do exactly what they say on the tin: they test, they probe, they examine, and they ask the genuinely hard questions about what we're really living for.

Ask Boldly

If these words are really hard to read, and your trial feels like you are stuck in a furnace and it is almost unbearable, then James tells

us to ask God for the wisdom to see it for what it is. “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him” (1:5). Experiencing suffering and counting it all joy certainly doesn’t come naturally; you need wisdom. But look who you are asking: the God “who gives generously to all without reproach.” God is not in heaven with arms folded, scolding you for finding the trial difficult. On the contrary, he is lavish in his help and his generosity overflows if we ask him for the wisdom to see that he is playing the long game, the maturity game.

Here is where a little theology can go a very long way. Just as the word “perfect” is probably better rendered “whole” or “complete” because of James’s vision of the undivided person, so too the word “generously” as part of the phrase “God, who gives generously,” in 1:5, might best be understood slightly differently. This is the Greek word *haplōs*, and several commentators show that it comes from a root whose basic meaning is “single” or “simple.” It is related to verses such as Ephesians 6:5, where, notes Moo, Paul tells slaves to obey their earthly masters “with *sincerity* of heart.”¹² Luke Timothy Johnson says that the word “signifies simplicity as opposed to complexity; by extension it signifies a lack of calculation and openness.”¹³ Here in James it means that God is the one “who gives sincerely, without hesitation or mental reservation,” says Peter Davids. “He does not grumble or criticize. His commitment to his people is total and undeserved: they can expect to receive.”¹⁴ Other scholars note how James’s instruction to ask God, who will give in a *haplōs* manner, is an intentional echo of Jesus’s words “Ask, and it will be given to you” (Matt. 7:7). There the emphasis is on the character of the one we petition: he is always ready and willing to give.

But more than this, in Luke 11:34, where Jesus says, “When your eye is *healthy*, your whole body is full of light,” he uses a word that is linked to *haplōs*, such that older translations like the King James Version render this as the “*single eye*,” Moo comments.¹⁵ Inner health depends on the eye seeing with uprightness, with integrity.

The point is this: words and ideas that we might apply to sincere and undivided *creatures* are actually being used by James in relation to *God*. As Moo says, James has taken a term “denoting ‘integrity’ and applied it to God. Such a linguistic move makes sense in the light of James’ tendency to portray Christian character as a reflection and outgrowth of God’s.”¹⁶ So, God gives singularly and sincerely in order to create single-minded, sincere-hearted children.

I will tease out the implications of this. At the heart of James 1:1–18 is a fundamental contrast between God, as our Creator and perfect heavenly Father, and us, as creatures shot through with imperfection and sin. God is everything we are not. He is simple, undivided, and whole, and there is nothing about him that lacks integrity. We are partitioned, fractured, double-minded, and capable of being lured into sin by our own sinful desires. When we face trials, one of the main ways we fail to be steadfast is by giving in to temptation and by blaming God for what is happening in our lives (1:13). And when that happens, we need to know that the evil we are grappling with comes from inside us and not from God, for God cannot be tempted by evil (1:13–14). God is pure goodness, unadulterated light; we suffer from a fallenness that pollutes us from head to toe, leading us astray.

My friend Ben Traynor says that in this part of James it is as if Temptation and Desire form an illicit union, and then, before we know it, we meet them in the maternity ward: the fruit of their union is a child called Sin. Many years later Sin herself gives birth to

her own child: Death (1:15).¹⁷ But, amazingly, in contrast to these illicit and deadly unions, God also gives birth: he brings forth redeemed creatures within his creation by his “word of truth,” whom he calls the “firstfruits” (1:18). It is a profoundly beautiful phrase, as we will see in the next chapter. In a world of division, sin, and death, God has a way of starting again within his created order, with us his children, as an advance sign of his eventual restoration of the whole of creation. One day, wholeness will be present on every side in the new creation. For now, however, God starts with us.

So, the point of this contrast that James is making between God and us, as well as his behavior and ours, is to hold out to us the path of wholeness. It is not fundamentally about saying or doing the right things, or even believing the right things, important as these are, but rather about receiving the gift of wisdom from God, *so that we become like him*. The path to wholeness is the path to imitating God by receiving what he gives us.

This is why the Lord Jesus says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt. 5:8). He is referring, primarily, not to moral purity, although that’s undoubtedly included, but rather to an integration and singleness of heart over and against a double heart. We cannot see God unless we are like him, and to be like him, we have to be undivided.

Here is where some more deep theology is so beautiful. Theologians talk about the doctrine of “divine simplicity,” which teaches that God is a simple being. Used in this way, the word “simple” does not have an intellectual sense, as if God were not mysterious or immense; nor does it mean that his ways are straightforwardly comprehensible to us. Rather, it is being used in the sense of compositional integrity. God is one. He is whole. He is not comprised of parts—different attributes like wisdom,

power, and goodness—as if he could dispense with any one of them and yet remain God. No, what God *has* (wisdom, power, goodness, love, and so on), he actually *is*.¹⁸ And everything God has and is, he is perfectly.

Divine perfection is what is known as a “summative attribute,” an attribute that characterizes all his other attributes: his wisdom, goodness, and power are *perfect* wisdom, *perfect* goodness, and *perfect* power.¹⁹ Divine simplicity rests on the biblical idea that God is self-existent (Ex. 3:14), and his being and attributes do not depend on anything or anyone else. This is why James says that God is the “Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (1:17). If God is perfectly wise, good, powerful, loving, and so on, then he cannot ever become more wise, more good, or more powerful, and he cannot ever become less of any of his attributes either. He cannot change because he has no lack to overcome, nor any higher blessedness yet to realize. Who and what God is, he is, perfectly. Nothing *makes* him wise or good or loving; he *is* these qualities because he is who he is.

If this is making your head hurt, then take a step back. James believes that God is a united whole, a being of perfect integrity and oneness, and our greatest problem is that we are not yet like him in our character. We are pulled in different directions, capable of great good and of catastrophic evil, tossed like waves on the sea by the wind. But God is constant, immovably and unchangeably good in who he is and what he gives.

This has wonderfully rich applications for us. Sometimes it is the older theologians who express these things best, not just in terms of depth of understanding but in the beauty of their practical outworkings too. The seventeenth-century Reformed Dutch pastor and theologian Petrus van Mastricht understood exactly what

difference this view of God makes to everyday life. He said, based on James 1:5, that because God is “most simple,” he gives simply, that is, without division or parts. When God gives, he “gives himself, all that he is, and all his attributes, which, by simplicity, are inseparable—his wisdom, power, goodness and grace—devoting them to us.”²⁰

This is why James will later tell us, “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you” (4:8). *He* will draw near, all of him, his person. God doesn’t seek to overcome our dividedness by giving us bits of him that we might like to patch up who we are, as if we’re doing all right in the “goodness” department but we could do with a bit of a top-up in the “wisdom” department. No, in giving us wisdom when we ask for it, God is actually giving us himself. And so, because of this divine action toward us, Mastricht says, “Let us also then with a simple and whole heart rest in God alone, and because of his integrity and uprightness . . . let us promise him all that is ours (Psalm 25:11).”²¹ This is Deuteronomy 6:4–5 in action. There should be a correspondence between who God is and who we are, and this alignment wonderfully expresses James’s vision of believers in relation to our Father in heaven.

So, for James, God is our Father and we are his children, and that relationship should express itself in sincere asking. It’s really important to know that James’s words about asking in faith and not doubting do not mean that all true Christians never have doubts. That is clearly not true. Rather, as it has been said, doubt is faith thinking itself clear. The opposite of faith is not doubt; it is unbelief. We often wrestle with the difficult contours of Christian belief in a painful world. That may be where you are today. It’s certainly where many of us are all the time, and where I often am.

What James means here by doubt is amplified in 1:6–8. He has in mind the person who goes with God’s wisdom on a Sunday but the world’s wisdom on a Monday. That person likes friendship with God on a Tuesday but friendship with the world on a Wednesday. Double-minded people are blown here and there. They cannot give themselves to what God says, or to crying out to him: “Lord, I long to follow you with all my heart. Heal me; help me.” Instead, they pick and mix, with a bit of Jesus and a bit of their own thinking. A bit of Bible and a bit of the world. A bit of you, Lord, and a bit—just a bit—of everything else.

Boast Rightly

It is very likely that the greatest trial these believers were facing was that, in their poverty, they were being persecuted by the rich. “But you have dishonored the poor man. Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court?” (James 2:6). James teaches us that the only way to cope with the trials that come from money, the trials of not having enough or of having too much money, is to boast rightly. “Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation” (1:9–10). If you are lowly, boast in the fact that in God’s eyes you are exalted; if you are rich, boast in the gospel that takes you from way up high and puts you down on the same level as everyone else. Boast rightly, in the eternal kingdom, in the crown of life, for “like a flower of the grass [the rich] will pass away. For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass. . . . So also will the rich man fade away” (1:10–11).

I watched the famous footballer (soccer player) Cristiano Ronaldo on the news recently. He had a huge smile on his handsome, tanned face. “I have everything,” he said. “I have everything.”

I thought, “Yes, you have everything today, but what about tomorrow?”

Some years ago, I watched the heartrending funeral of George Best, the Manchester United and Northern Ireland legend. He was the greatest footballing superstar of the modern era. Everyone wanted a piece of him, but he was overtaken by the tragedy of alcoholism. Now I have to tell my sons his name. They don’t know him. He’s gone.

Do you ever find yourself just wishing for a little bit more? Not the lottery, Lord, nothing that obscene—but just a bit more. Enough to be more comfortable, enough not to have to worry—a cushion, a buffer. Enough to get by properly. What we don’t consider in these idle wishes is that if money were to take away all the stresses of life, we would just have a new battle to fight in order to see clearly the passing nature of all our riches. When my lowliness does not lead me to boast in the fact that in Jesus God has lifted me up to the heavens and seated me with him there, and when my financial pressure does not lead me to boast in my lowliness, I have one foot in this world and the other in the next. I’m split. When my riches don’t lead me to boast in the humbling cross of Christ and things that will last forever, then I might be friends with God, but at the same time I am nurturing my friendship with the world. I’m split.

Let Petrus van Mastricht help us again.

Divine simplicity teaches us to acquiesce to our lot, however simple it may be. For the more simple anything is, the more constant it is, and durable, whereas the more composite, likewise the more dissoluble and corruptible. Thus, God is most immutable because he is most simple, while on the contrary

the angels, because they exist with qualities that are distinct from their essence, were able to be corrupted by their sin, and material things are the more corruptible the more composite they are, just as we see if we compare stable chemical elements with substances that are mixed. When it comes to our lot, the exact same is true: the more simple, solid, and the more variegated from composition by wealth, honours, friends, the more mutable, and the more you are distracted by so many objects, the more you are liable to cares and anxieties (Luke 10:41), for the more you possess, the more you can lose. It is thus, on this account, that we should, in godly self-sufficiency, accustom our soul to simplicity, and should substitute, for the variety of things the one God who is most sufficient in every way for all things (Gen. 17:1), who is accordingly for us the one thing necessary (Luke 10:42). So then let us possess him as our lot, with a simple acquiescence, and other things as corollaries (Matt. 6:33), looking to the Apostle, who urges this contentment (1 Tim. 6:6) and lights our way in it with his own example (Phil. 4:11–12).²²

Questions for Discussion or Personal Reflection

1. How do you feel about the Bible's vision of "perfection" as the goal for every Christian? Try to explain that vision in your own words.
2. Why do we find it so hard to consider the trials of life "all joy" (James 1:2), and what difference does this chapter make to that struggle?
3. How does God as one, simple, and unchanging become the solution to our quest for wholeness?

4. In what ways do you find yourself longing for “a little bit more”?

5. Do you have any personal experience of growth (wholeness) developing through suffering? Can you articulate why and how that happened?