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The Rescuers

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James 5:19-20

Well, we come to the end of James, and James has painted for us this portrait of a struggle; the portrait of a struggle of living by this new paradigm; no longer living a life that's driven by my wants, my needs, my feelings, now living a life that's driven by the call of the Kingdom of God.

Think with me, if you had written the content of the book of James, how would you have ended this letter? Maybe you would've ended it with words of encouragement. Maybe you would have ended it with a benediction. Maybe you would have ended it with a very clear reminder of the rescuing grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But I would like to propose to you this evening that there couldn't possibly be a better ending than what we find in these two verses that we're going to look at. In a real way, these two verses summarize, very powerfully, everything that James has said to us as he's painted this comprehensive, multifaceted portrait of life as a believer in this broken and fallen world.

Look again with me in your bulletins at that passage that's there in the bold, verses 19 and 20 of James 5:

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. (ESV)

Now, you may look at those verses and say, "Well Paul, what does that have to do with the message of James? What does this wandering away from truth have to do with what James has presented?"

I would propose to you this is the only thing that James has talked about. What James has talked about from stem to stern is this shocking and scary potential all of us have in some way to wander away from the truth. As long as there is sin still living in our hearts, there is, in every one of us, a proneness to wander.

You can't help in reading these words to think of the third verse of "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing." Do you remember it?

Oh to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!

Let Thy goodness, (that grace now) like a fetter, (a chain)
Bind my wandering heart to thee:
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it; Seal it for Thy courts above.

James has talked to us about how we'll wander into doubt in moments of trial; how in subtle ways by the desires of own heart, we wander into temptation; how we will wander away from graciousness into all forms of ungodly anger; how we wander from humble love into prejudice; how we wander into a separation from what we say we believe to the way that we actually live; how we wander from dependency in God into self-sovereignty; how we wander away from unity and peace into conflict with one another; how we wander from thankfulness into unthankful grumbling; how easily we wander into un-biblical and unhelpful talk; how we wander, even though we say we believe in God, into desperate and prayer-less living.

What I've done for you is just summarize the content of the book of James. At every point, James is warning us with the potential that all of us have to wander away from the truth. Hear this: you never, ever just wander away theologically, because the thoughts of the heart will always precede and determine your activity. You're wandering always somehow becomes a wandering of your life.

And hear this: you never wander away in one big dramatic moment. One of the things that I think is wrong with the way we interpret this verse is we interpret it with way too much drama than James ever meant, because every person who has wandered, that wandering has started out subtly. It started out in the mundane; it started out with seductive lies; it started out with self-serving little arguments, and it's grown, and it's grown, and it's grown until shockingly, that person has turned his back on the only thing that would ever give him hope, the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. It doesn't start that dramatically; it starts with subtle, little wanderings.

Don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about. There are people in this room, you've wandered from the truth in your marriage, and you're not living in that state of one flesh anymore. You're living in something that would best be called 'Christian marital détente.' You make it work, but in God's eyes, it's not a Biblical marriage.

Some of you have wandered away into a cold sort of relationship with God. You've lost your fervor. And, oh yes, you still attend church, but what drives your life is something else. Some of you have wandered away in your thoughts, and you know you give your thoughts to things that you should never give your thoughts to.

Some of you have wandered away into envy, and you look at the life and the story of somebody else, and you bring God into the court of your own judgment and judge Him as being unloving to you, judge Him as being partial and prejudicial. Some of you have wandered into questioning God's love, His faithfulness, His grace. Some of us have

wandered into materialism, and we have debt to show for it. There's a way in which all of us somehow, someway wander.

There are perhaps ways in which all of us have opened our hearts and lives to things that we would never have thought of doing when we first came to the Lord Jesus Christ. Brothers and sisters, this passage is a mirror; it's a call for all of us to weep, all of us to own the places where we have been quite comfortable with wandering away from the truth. I would say this evening as your pastor, "Where have you wandered?" Receive the warning that is so powerful here in this passage.

"My brothers, if any one among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins." Right smack dab on this very important warning, a warning to everyone in this room, comes a call to everyone in this room. It's a call to action. It's a call to loving and restorative relationships with one another.

It's an amazing thing that the bringing back of a person is not assigned just to the pastors and the elders of Christ's church. This restorative mission, this rescuing mission is a call to every person in the church of Jesus Christ. Look around. You are the rescuers that God has placed in His church. Tenth Church must not just be a place where you can find ministry; it must be an organic ministering community.

And part of the new paradigm is I just don't live for my own spiritual well-being, but I accept the moral responsibility for the well-being of the people that God has placed in my life. I am part of what God is doing on earth. I'm part of His system of rescue. I'm an instrument of His restoration, and I must live that way.

Maybe you can sense a bit of my passion. Brothers and sisters, but here's the bottom line, you can't minister to that which you do not know. And we must stop being willing to live in terminally casual relationships with nice talk that never reaches where we actually live, with relationships that never grow knowledgeable, that never can be restorative, because we never break through the casual. That is giving the enemy an opportunity in our midst.

I know it's inappropriate to bear your soul to everyone, but it's dangerous to not understand the mission and calling of the body of Christ. You will never hire enough staff at Tenth Church to cover the ministry needs of any given week in this body.

Those of us who have this scary and holy calling to stand behind this desk are not called to shoulder all of the ministry that is necessary. Our calling is to equip the rescuers to be part of God's work of rescue.

Now, do you love your brothers and sisters enough to be part of that bringing back? The language is restorative. When you restore a house, you bring it back to the condition for which it was created.

One of the sad things that I would experience again and again as I counseled individuals and couples at CCEF, by the time they got to me, their stories would be dramatic and complicated. But as I would listen to the story, I would be impressed again and again how that story once wasn't so dramatic and wasn't so complicated. It began with little moments of wandering, and rescue could have been provided by any serious member of the body of Christ, but it was not. And this thing grew, and grew, and grew to a level of drama and layers and layers of complication that were almost confounding.

I would ask you: do you have a consumer's or a rescuer's relationship to the body of Christ? Are you here with the mentality that I am part of the ongoing work of redemption that God is doing, and I recognize that it's a level playing field because of the proneness of our hearts to wander? All of us are in need of help and all of us are called to be helpers

Do you live with the restorer's intentionality? Do you work to have relationships that press beyond the casual so you know the struggles of people; you can pray for them wisely; you can ask good questions; you can be part of this calling back that needs to happen all the time? I'll speak for myself; there's not a week where somehow, somehow, I don't need to be called back.

James is a good pastor; he gets how immense the task is, and it's right that he ends this book that's been a portrait of wandering with a call to loving, restorative, redemptive community.

Are you receiving the call? Are you living the call? Are you making intentional, relational decisions to be part of what God is doing in the lives of people that God has sovereignly placed in your pathway?

Look at verse 20, "Let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins." Having given us a warning, having mobilized us with a call, James would remind us of how high the stakes are.

What are the stakes? Brothers and sisters, nothing less than this: life and death. Do you know why sin doesn't scare us? Do you know why we can wander away? Because we tell ourselves it's something less than life or death.

We tell ourselves it's not such a big thing. We tell ourselves it won't hurt us. We tell ourselves we can handle it. We tell ourselves it's just this once. We tell ourselves we didn't really mean it. We tell ourselves it's not really us; it was really caused by somebody else. And all of those things minimize what James is saying.

Listen, when you wander away, you are wandering towards something that is dangerous and destructive, life altering: it's called death. And your life is moving in a life direction, moving in obedience, and submission, and hope, and encouragement toward the call of the Lord Jesus Christ, or your life is moving in a death direction where you are beginning to step away from those commitments.

Remember the Proverbs: "There's a way that seems right to a man, (Do you know how to finish it?) but the end thereof are the ways of death." Here is the scariest thing that a sinner is able to do; here it is: I'm able to look at death and see life! And if I can do that, the enemy has me,

Stakes are high in your marriage. Stakes are high at your university. Stakes are high at your place of employment. Stakes are high in your friendship. Stakes are high in the privacy of your solace. Stakes are high, and there is an enemy who would whisper in our ears, "It's not so dangerous. It's not so bad. It's life. There is life there."

Listen, in the garden, the evil that the serpent did was he pointed to death, and he named it as life. And once Adam and Eve were able to look at death and see life, they were able to turn their backs on their Creator. Stakes are high, and that's why the warning is so important; that's why the call is so important, and then that's why the encouragement of grace is so timely. "Whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and cover a multitude of sins."

Listen! James is not arguing that when you get involved with God's rescue mission, all of a sudden, you have messianic power. Are you listening to me? You will never have messianic power. I hope that's not a shock to you. But when you bring someone back, you are bringing them to the Messiah who has awesome power to rescue, to forgive, to restore, to heal, to cleanse.

And Jesus is glorious in His patience; He's glorious in His grace. You would expect a holy God to say, "How dare you wander away from Me?" But this holy God says, "You come. I have died to forgive you. I have died to cover your sins. I have died to restore you--you come, you come, you come."

Here's what I would say to you this evening, "If you embrace the warning, if you accept the call, if you believe in that grace, then how can you be inactive?" Because if the warning is true, and it is, and if the call is for all of us, and it is, and if this grace is available, then the activism of this body should be unrelenting.

We would be God's rescuers because we know the danger of the proneness of the heart to wander; we know that all of us haven't only been adopted into His family, but we've been employed in His service, and we know that where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more, and so we move out. We want to know one another, not just because relationships are fulfilling, but because we see the Kingdom and its call in those relationships. And we say, "If I live eighty years and only at one moment in eighty years, I am used in the

hands of God to rescue another person from spiritual death, my life has been worth living.”

Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it
Here's my heart, take and seal it

May God help us to be that loving, restorative, redemptive community.

Let's pray: Thank you, Lord, for the beautiful truths of Your Word. Thank you for the accuracy of the description of this passage. Yes, we would recognize the proclivity in all of our hearts to wander away, first in subtle ways from Your call from the call of truth.

And yes, we would receive the moral responsibility to be part of the rescue you would provide for all of us through all of us. And yes, we would humbly confess we've been too casual with sin. And we've been too casual in our relationships, and the combination of those two things places us in danger. Help us to see the life-and-death stakes of wandering away, and because of that, the importance of the rescuing call that You have given us.

And help us to remember that as we wander back, being helped by brothers and sisters, wander back like prodigals, Messiah Jesus runs to meet us in the road and meets us with grace that covers, and restores, and rescues, and forgets. Praise You for the cross that purchased that forgiveness! Praise You for the empty tomb that conquered sin and death. We love You, but we are so grateful that we have been loved by You. In Jesus's name, Amen.