

James 5:19-20

Have you ever known a believer who has wandered away from the clear teaching of Scripture? How about you; have you ever done so? People may be active in a local church, and yet over a period of time slowly, almost imperceptibly, wander away from the truth. At the beginning of their journey, they would never have imagined where their trek would take them, but eventually it was apparent they were wandering from the right path, the way of truth.

This sponsors a lot of questions:

- Why does this happen?
- What can be done to stop or rescue a person from this unintentional departure from the faith?
- What are the characteristics of the person who is prone to wander?

To answer these questions, let us take an inventory of what we have observed ourselves, and then we will see what the Scripture has to say. Because most of us have known someone (perhaps even ourself) who has wandered away from the truth, let's think about and observe what causes a person to wander.

We might be:

Distracted Wanderers

Perhaps we get distracted from our devotion to Christ and His church, because of some good thing we want to do. It could be a cause we are concerned about; even a friend we would like to influence for Christ. We might want to get an education, or acquire some training so we can get a better job. We might decide our family needs to become more of a priority in our life.

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No matter how worthwhile our pursuit might be, if we do not continually draw on our resources in Christ and allow the Lord and His Word to direct our path, we might wander away. Our good goal may become more important to us than even our own faith. I have seen this happen literally hundreds of times in churches.

Discouraged Wanderers

At times our wandering is because we have gotten out of the habit of spiritually feeding ourselves, or of attending church. As a result, we become weak and lethargic in our faith and do not live up to the commands of Scripture, especially in a testing time. Rather than returning to the Word, we may become discouraged and wander away because we think our faith is not working for us.

The real problem is, we are not working our faith.

There is also an enemy who tries to lead us astray.

Deceived Wanderers

There are occasions when we wander because we believe a lie, and only later discover the lie has deceived us and led us off course.

Disillusioned Wanderers

Some begin their new faith in Christ with the mistaken idea that all their problems will be solved, and they will not have to go through any more hard times. They also believe all people who call themselves Christians will live an exemplary life. (I was disillusioned by failing pastors.) Some will go through a hard time and/or witness Christians not living up to their expectations, and will become disillusioned and just wander away from the faith.

The truth is, the normal way for us to grow is through hard times, and other Christians will fail us. If we insist on a hardship-free life with perfect fellow Christians, we will be disillusioned. Remember the life of Paul and his associate, Demas.

Disgruntled Wanderers

These people are angry at someone for inappropriate or even appropriate behavior or statements. Their anger/bitterness robs them of their joy, and they wander.

Divided Wanderers

They are described in James 1:7 as those who are double-minded and thus unstable in all their ways. They are trying to go in opposite directions at the same time.

The Cure/Solution

What can be done about this?

What should we do if we see this happening to a person we know? If a person leaves the faith, shouldn't we just let them go? After all, they have made their choice, and we cannot force them to return. We cannot force them to change their ways, but James says there is something we can do. He closes his letter by speaking of a wanderer who apparently does not set out to rebel, but eventually does end up wandering from the truth.

James indicates a very specific way to respond to this distracted, discouraged, deceived, disillusioned, disgruntled, divided wanderer. In James 5:19-20 we see the potential to wander and the proper response.

The Potential is Disclosed

v. 19—*"My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back..."* Notice the probable wandering and the potential return.

The Probable Wandering

It is not inevitable that every Christian will wander, but it is probable. As the old hymn

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says, "Prone to wander, Lord I feel it." *Prone* means "having a tendency; inclined to wander." Look at some key words in v. 19:

- "My brothers, if *one of you*..." This denotes the erring person is a member of the Body, or a regular attender. James is addressing believers.

- "*wander*" can mean deliberately going astray by one's own will, or being led astray by external forces. The main picture is of one who has lost his way and is wandering aimlessly. It is the word used in Matthew 18:12— "*What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them*

wanders

away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that

wandered

off"?

Straying sheep is a metaphor used throughout Scripture—Is. 9:16; Ez. 34:4-5; Heb. 5:2; 1 Pet. 2:25. This does not imply that they are spiritually dead, but that these fellow Christians are like sheep in the dangerous condition of straying away from protection of the fold.

- "...wandering *from the truth*..." They are wandering from the truth and into a lie. "The truth" refers to the person and work of Christ (John 14:6), and of course the word *truth*

means all Christ taught and instituted. In general, truth refers to the whole body of the gospel and our obligation to it—1:18; 3:14; Jn. 8:32; 16:13, e.g., what we hear and are called to do.

More specifically, in the context of the book of James, wandering from the truth refers to: sinful speech, disobedience, unconcern for others, quarrelling, favoritism, unspiritual wisdom, boasting, oppression of the poor, inappropriate swearing, prayer without faith, etc.

So here is a fellow believer who is wandering from the truth: the truth taught in the book

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of James, and the truth of Scripture. What is needed?

James gives us the answer!

The Potential Return

This is described in v. 19c—"*...and someone should bring him back...*"

James encourages every believer to take the initiative to bring back into fellowship with God and community, any who have wandered from the truth. He calls us to the *reclamation* and *restoration* of any straying believer. To get a better picture of what that rescue and restoration entails, look at the last verse in James.

The Proper Response is Described—vv. 19-20

19] *"My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, 20] remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins."*

In general, what are we called to do? There are four R's we can note here.

Remembrance

v. 20—"*...remember this.*" The recipients of James might forget; so they need to be reminded. Likewise, we may forget! We may forget how important it is to take the initiative and bring a wanderer back, because we get involved in our own life and family. We may also forget we were brought back too!

Notice specifically what we are to remember:

Reroute

v. 20b—"*Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way. . .*" This phrase describes a tender and pastoral response. The implication is obvious: someone needs to go after the sinning believer, or he/she may not come back.

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Who specifically can do the "turning?" The "whoever" of verse 20 and "someone" of verse 19 make it clear it isn't just the elders or church leaders who are responsible to turn a sinner from their error. I wonder how many straying believers are not back in the community because we have not taken the initiative to go after them. What is your response when someone fails, or is not around the church for awhile? Do you write them off, or do you take some responsibility to find out how they are doing?

Do not assume someone else will or should go after the person who is wandering. You may be the only one who sees the wandering taking place. Whatever system of care a local church might have, the best results occur when each person sensitively responds to the nudges of the Holy Spirit (gets an impression to ask how someone is doing), and then follows up on it.

My strongest encouragement is to respond to the nudges, even if you get embarrassed. Someone's faith may need your intervention. In addition, monitor your friends. If the Holy Spirit brings a concern to you regarding one of your friends, check it out even if you have to risk your friendship. You may be the only one who can help.

Repentance

v. 20c—". . .turns a sinner . . . "

Whatever the reason for a person straying from God and the truth, this is the only way we can bring them back—a turning, a repentance. Even if someone else contributed to the wandering, this passage reminds us the wanderer is still responsible for his/her actions. We cannot blame someone else for our wandering, so the road back must include our repentance from sin—2 Cor. 7:13.

It is no fun for a restorer who sometimes must hurt a wanderer in order to get his attention—Prov. 27:6. It can be very painful for both. But if that person returns to the Lord, any pain experienced will be small in comparison to the joy that will be felt when the sinner repents—2 Cor. 7:8-9.

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How will you know when they repent? The Scripture outlines for us the fruit of repentance in 2 Cor. 7:10-12. If we want to know if a person has truly repented, turned back to God and the truth, then this passage will describe the return journey.

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter. So even though I wrote to you, it was not on account of the one who did the wrong or of the injured party, but rather that before God you could see for yourselves how devoted to us you are.

Study it carefully!

What will be the ultimate result? Besides the return to the community of Christ, James reminds us of some awesome occurrences in the latter part of v. 20. We will call it:

Restoration

v. 20d—". . . will save him from death AND cover over a multitude of sins."

There are two possible results:

1. ". . .save him from death." What does that mean? Depending on your theology, it could convey one of the following:

This person was not a believer in the first place, so when he turned, he became a believer—1 John 2:9. I don't think so, because verse 19 says "one of you..." The implication is that this person is a believer.

Some think if the wanderer is a believer, then this verse means the wanderer's repentance saved him from eternal spiritual death and separation from God.

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Others would say, if this verse is not referring to spiritual death, it implies premature physical death—1 Cor. 5:5; 11:30; Ps. 32:3-4. The Scripture speaks of many who have suffered sickness or premature death due to their sinful ways.

Whatever the interpretation, this verse expresses the seriousness of wandering away, and there will be a price if we do. Prov. 15:10—*"Stern discipline awaits him who leaves the path; he who hates correction will die."* (See also Hebrews 12:4-11.)

1. *"...and cover over a multitude of sins."* What does a multitude of sins mean? It is a Hebrew idiom meaning *forgive*—Ps. 88:2; 32:1; Rom. 4:7. The blood of Jesus is available for covering; no one is hopeless; forgiveness is available. 1 John 2:2—*"He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."*

"...a multitude of sins" may refer not only to those sins committed during the wandering, but also those prevented because the person turned and did not continue on their journey. That is what these verses mean in general. But what do they specifically mean to the kinds of wanderers we talked about at the beginning of this message? How do we help those who are straying from the truth to repent and return?

The Solution for Helping Those Who Wander

Distracted Wanderers: Help them to once again focus their priorities on kingdom values—Matt. 6:33; 1 Tim. 6:10-11; Luke 10:38-42.

Discouraged Wanderers: Assist them in rekindling their inner life, Matt. 6:5-18, and to put their hope in God—Psalm 42:1-11.

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Deceived Wanderers: Reaffirm the truth to them in love—Eph. 4:15,25; 1 Tim. 1:3-7; 6:20-21; 2 Tim. 2:17-19. Replace the lie!!!

Disillusioned Wanderers: Return their focus to Jesus, the Author and Finisher of their faith—Heb. 12:1-3.

Disgruntled Wanderers: Remind them to get rid of their rage/anger, and forgive just as Christ forgave us—Eph. 4:31-32.

Divided Wanderers: Reiterate the need to repent, the necessity to believe and not doubt, and not be divided in their loyalty—James 1:5-8.

James begins his book with some encouraging words for those of us who are in the midst of testing, and he tells us to be joyful. He concludes with the blessedness of restoration. If we are not all we should be, and we fail in the task that is outlined in James, then we should know there is forgiveness and restoration if we will only repent.

An Old Testament example of a wanderer who was not fully restored was Solomon. He had everything, but something began to slip deep within his life. Without noise or notice, he began to wander from his spiritual moorings. *Little things were first tolerated, then accepted, then finally embraced*. Soon his heart was not wholly devoted to God, and he did not follow the Lord or His Word fully.

Likewise, we need to uncover the signs of drifting and wandering in our lives as well.

A word of alert: let those of us who think we stand take heed, or we also may fall!—1 Cor. 10:12. A wandering spirit does not usually start with blatant rejection. It starts with half-hearted and uncommitted Christianity. Then a closer look reveals the signs of straying from the truth: a step here, a leap there; a compromise here, a digression from a conviction there. However strong and committed we might think we are, we all have a propensity to wander.

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Very few run away from the faith suddenly; they just roam or meander away slowly little by little, step by step, compromise by compromise. Therefore, if you see signs of a wandering spirit or discontent begin to take place in your life, test yourself—Gal. 6:1b, 3-5.

A wandering believer may be hearing this message today. God sees your condition, your wandering; but He extends help and hope to you if you will allow yourself to be turned from the sin of wandering. You may just recently be aware of your condition. You may have been aware of your aimless journey from God for some time. Whatever the case, God wants this message to be the catalyst to turn you around and point you in the right direction again. The call is to repent, return, and be restored to the vital relationship you once had.

Appendix

Here's a quote from a tape by George Wood.

"Korean Air, flight #007 (you may remember this from October, 1983) departed Anchorage, Alaska for a direct flight to Seoul, Korea. Unknown to the pilot and the crew, the computer engaging the flight navigation system contained a 1-1/2 degree routing error. At the point of departure, the mistake was unnoticeable. 100 miles out, the deviation was still so small as to be undetectable. But as the giant 747 continued on its journey through the Aleutians and out over the Pacific, the error was picked up by Soviet radar. Jets were scrambled for the intercept, and over Mainland Russia, hundreds of miles off course, #007 was shot out of the sky, and all aboard were lost. A small error made at the departure point resulted in a tragic trajectory and a destructive finish. May the Lord help us to keep comparing where we are going with the navigation charts so we stay on course and not wander into the enemy's territory."—

George Wood