

God's Promise in the Face of Poverty, Trial and Tribulation

Week One
June 28 – July 2

**A Daily Study of the Book of James
Summer 2021**

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

James 1.2-4

Cornerstone Assembly of God
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Monday, June 28James 1:1

James a Servant

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

STUDY QUESTIONS

Jesus is central to the message of James. In the first verse of his letter, he introduces himself as a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

1. How does James see himself as a servant?
2. Why is the title of Lord important to see Jesus how James sees him?
3. The term 'Christ' carries the meaning of the word Messiah. Why is it important to James to know Jesus as the Messiah?
4. Why is it a refreshing privilege to us to affirm Jesus as Lord and Messiah over our lives?
5. How does recognizing the Lordship and authority of Jesus over our lives surrendered to Him remove the burdens the world tries to put on us?

• PRAYER POINT •

A SERVANT OF THE MOST HIGH GOD

- How can you recognize the Lordship of Jesus in your life in a new way today?
- Who can you celebrate the good news of the Messiah with today?

COMMENTARY

v. 1: James... Most early church Fathers believed the James who authored the letter to the dispersed Jewish Christians was the half-brother of Jesus (Galatians 1.19). He led the Jerusalem Church from AD 44 to AD 62.

Two other first-generation Apostles have been recommended by a few modern scholars, namely, James the son of Zebedee and James the son of Alphaeus. James the son of Zebedee (Mark 1.19), the brother of John, was the first pastor of the Jerusalem congregation. He was martyred in AD 44 by King Herod (Acts 12.2). His early death has often excluded him from consideration as the author of the letter. James the son of Alphaeus was a close disciple of Jesus, identified in the synoptic gospels and Acts. Although mentioned in Acts 1.13 gathering with the other apostles in the upper room, he does not reappear in the Biblical narrative.

a servant... The Greek term, translated here as servant, was used for someone who belonged to another. It connoted a slave or bondservant, a person who did not have ownership rights over himself or herself. James and the New Testament writers turned this Greek term on its ear, transforming it from one of involuntary powerlessness and possession to a voluntary servant with great dignity who voluntarily submitted to the Lordship of Jesus. The servanthood they have in mind is more like that found in the lives of Moses (Deut. 34.5) and David (Ezek. 37.24), Amos (Amos 3.17), and other prophets. From this standpoint, “it is both a claim to subordination to Christ and a claim to privilege and honor in the Jewish messianic community...” (McKnight)

a servant of God... James’ understanding of servanthood is not separated from the realities of everyday life. His open letter to the dispersed Jewish Christians presents their walk with God in light of the practical situations of life we all face. God is not absent from the mundane aspects of our lives. In fact, as servants of God we can root our service in revealed nature of God’s generosity (1.5), holiness (1.13), and grace (4.6).

[a servant] of the Lord Jesus Christ... James makes it clear that he is a servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. He applies the title of Lord, previously ascribed only to God to Jesus Christ, thereby expressing their unity. He recognizes that his service to God the Father is service to his Lord Jesus Christ.

It is worth noting that the two half- brothers of Jesus, James and Jude (born to Mary and Joseph), call themselves servants of Jesus Christ. They do not refer to themselves with additional titles like apostle nor choose to leverage their message by highlighting their familial relationship to Jesus.

the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.... The audience James is writing to is Christian Jewish communities living outside of Palestine. After the exile, many Jews remained outside of the Promised Land in the communities they had established. While retaining

their Judaism, they adopted the languages and nonreligious customs of their surrounding cultures. After the day of Pentecost, many diaspora Jews and converted Gentiles heard the good news of Christ in Jerusalem and became followers of Jesus (Acts 2.41, 4.4). Over time, some returned home or were once again scattered due to the great persecution of the Church in Jerusalem (Acts 11.19). Those dispersed Jewish Christians carried the gospel with them to other Jewish communities, later followed by missionaries like Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13.14; 14.1; 17.1).

After the exile of both Kingdoms (Israel and Judah), the ten Northern tribes were lost. Following the exile, the phrase “twelve tribes” took on an important Messianic message of restoration. The remnant of Jewish people hoped for the day when God would regather all His scattered and lost people (Isa. 49:6; Ezek. 47:13). It is essential then for us when reading James’ message to the scattered Jews that his words are driven by a Messianic hope and Messianic revelation. James’ letter understands that the story of Israel, a repeating story of promise, failure, redemption and restoration, is the story God fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Greetings... James uses the similar greeting here that he used when writing to the Gentile believers after the Jerusalem Counsel (Acts 15.23). In this way, he establishes his pastoral relationship with his audience, much like a preacher would before opening his message with an illustration.

Tuesday, June 29..... James 1.2-4

Finding Joy in Surprising Places

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

STUDY QUESTIONS

“For those who have been tried and tested, trials and afflictions are the source of the greatest joy, for that is how their faith is proved.” — Oecumenius, 10th AD

Think how refreshing it is when we choose to see the lasting joy God is producing in the midst of our trials and difficulties rather than the temporary pain. Paraphrasing the fifth century saint, Hilary of Arles, we should remember that just as the world must pass through winter to arrive at spring and bring with her blooming flowers, so we must pass through difficult seasons before finding the prize we’ve been seeking.

1. Jesus once said, “the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it,” (Matthew 13.45-46). How is James echoing Christ, encouraging us to shift our focus?
2. What examples can you think of where painful experiences have produced joyful results?
3. It is important for James that those hearing his words understand their family relationship. Count how many times James refers to his audience as “my brothers.”
4. James writes that trials – unexpected encounters – can mature our character as they prove our faith. In your own words, what is James saying here?
5. What does it mean to let steadfastness have its full effect?

• PRAYER POINT •

STRESS-TESTED FAITH FOR A CHRIST-FILLED FUTURE

- James sees faith very practically, not as an ethereal vague force or a rigid dogma to be held, but as an active belief put into daily practice. How is God stress-testing your faith?
- Ask God to give you wisdom to see and understand how the present challenges you are facing are growing your faith to deeper spiritual maturity and Christlikeness.

COMMENTARY

v. 2: My brothers... James introduces new ideas and themes by calling to his audience. He does not refer to them in distant language or leave them nameless. James calls to his hearers in terms of family connection. They are more than a gathered group of strangers, or even countryfolk. They are brothers and sisters. James' use of "my brothers" is a preacher's way of drawing the attention of the audience back while also emphasizing why the message is important.

Consider it all joy... Scot McKnight writes convincingly that the ability to consider trials "as an occasion of joy involves an act of faith, for instead of looking at the trial, the messianic Jewish community is instead encouraged to look through the trial to its potential outcome." (McKnight) This is incredibly hard and countercultural to see trials as opportunities for joy. The illustration of childbirth is an apt one, considering the joy of the newborn baby brought forth through trial of contracting waves of pain.

Why then should we consider all trials as joy? James will soon explore the maturity that can be produced through trials as we fix our eyes on Jesus as well as the crown of life rewarded to all those who endure (1.12). Like the apostles who were tried in the Sanhedrin, we can choose to suffer the dishonor of this world for the sake of Christ's name (Acts 5.41).

How can Christians find joy in trials and tribulations? We can find joy if we approach them like fire that refines ore (1 Peter 1.7). We are able to count it all joy when we approach all aspects of life, include difficulties and persecutions, from a uniquely Christian perspective seeing, not what is immediately in front of us, but what is far ahead on the horizon.

when you encounter trials... Douglas Moo defines trials as "an outward circumstance that can pose difficulties to our faith." We often encounter these trials unexpectedly. The word James uses for encounters is only used three times in Scripture. It is used by Jesus in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.30). The Jewish man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho unexpectedly encountered robbers on his way. This unexpected trial has personal and communal implications – for the Jewish man left for dead and the countrymen that pass him by leaving him unassisted.

The other use of the word is found when Paul's ship carrying him to stand trial in Rome wrecks unexpectedly on the reef off the coast of Malta (Acts 27.41). This trial in the midst of other trials reveals the spiritual maturity of Paul who demonstrates how we can see through the trial believing God will work all things for our good and for His glory (Romans 8.28)

trials of various kinds... The original audience of James experienced religious persecution and poverty (which itself was connected in part to Jewish and Jewish

Christians non-participation in the sacrificial and sexual practices associated with business in the Greco-Roman world). These trials, however, are not limited to poverty and persecution, but include any sort of trial that could challenge a believer's faith.

v. 3: **you know**... James assumes a level of spiritual maturity of his audience. Their experience and knowledge make the foundation of what they know about the difficult testing of their faith. They are not suffering unaware that the trials that test their faith will produce endurance, and their enduring steadfastness will bring forth even more blessed gifts. They know because they have perceived this pattern before, if not in their lives then the lives of other Christians.

testing of your faith produces steadfastness... Steadfastness has been evenly translated as endurance, constance and perseverance. Christian men or women can stand affirmed that the knowledge they have of God's character will prove true as they walk their faith in the face of all kinds of trials. Their faith, lived out in the good times and hard times, will produce even greater endurance.

v. 4: **let steadfastness have its full effect that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing**... Perseverance, although a great blessing and reward born out of faith, is not the goal of the Christian life. Steadfastness that is produced in us as Christians who walk in faith through trials has knowing God and making Him known as its goal. Our enduring faith in this life, where we decrease as He increases (John 3.30), will bring forth a state of maturity and completeness where we will be like Jesus (1 John. 3.2; Ephesians 5.27; Colossians 1.22). This is not accomplished by us, but in us by the Holy Spirit.

Faith and Generosity, Doubt and Instability

⁵ If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. ⁶ 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. ⁷ For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why does James encourage his hearers to ask God for wisdom?

2. How is James' understanding of wisdom built on Proverbs (read 1.1–7 and 2.6–8)?

3. James uses both positive and negative illustrations of how we come before God with our requests.
 - a. Why can the one who asks in faith, without doubting, assume God will answer positively?

 - b. Why can the one who asks with doubt correctly assume that he will not receive anything from the Lord?

4. Why is God's character important for our faith, particularly as we ask Him for wisdom to understand the trials and tribulations we face?

5. What similarities do James' words have to Jesus' parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25.1-13)?

6. In these verses we see that God gives generously, single-mindedly with no hidden agenda. Why would it be incorrect to approach God with a double mind, or ulterior motivations hidden in our requests?

• PRAYER POINT •

HELP MY UNBELIEF

- Remember the father who came seeking Jesus' power to free his possessed son (Mark 9.14-29). Praise the Lord for His amazing generosity and compassion for us when we come with sincerity and trust, laying our unbelief bare before the One who does not begrudgingly answer us.
- Ask Jesus how you can shake off more of the instability that comes from doubt as you trust yourself to His plan.
- Hear the words God spoke to Jeremiah (29:12-14). Write what He is saying to you today.

COMMENTARY

v. 5: **lacks wisdom**... James finished the previous sentence with the word lacking (i.e. “let steadfastness have its full effect that you may be...lacking nothing.”). The presumption is that as maturing Christians there is still room to grow. What area is more important in our spiritual maturity than wisdom? Therefore, this sets the stage for James to ask, “Now, if any of you lacks wisdom ask God.”

Scot McKnight draws our attention to James’ later statements: 1) Wisdom is supernatural in origin (3.15). 2) Wisdom “is manifested through deeds of mercy and holiness,” (3.17). 3) The wisdom that God gives His people leads them to sow peace and reap a harvest of righteousness.

ask God [for wisdom]...Hilary of Arles writes “God gives wisdom like a fountain which never runs out of water [unlike] the wisdom of philosophers [which] is not given in abundance and is soon spit out.” The Old Testament wisdom literature (i.e. Job 33.33, Proverbs 15.33) is echoed across Scripture that God is the true source of all wisdom (see Psalms 51.6, Daniel 2.21 and Ephesians 1.17). Unlike the wisdom of this world that is fleeting and quickly turns sour, the wisdom of God is given in abundance and stays sweet.

ask God, who gives generously... The adverb *haplous* here translated ‘generously’ occurs only once in the New Testament. The word itself comes from an adjective that means ‘unfolded, single.’ Therefore, God gives with a single focus, without a hidden intent or double agenda. This use of *haplous* sets up the use of an antonym of *diplous* (double) of those who ask God with a double-mind or double soul (*dipsuchos*).

[ask God, who gives] ungrudgingly...

God gives single-mindedly. He does not give with reluctance. There is no hesitation in the generosity of God’s response to His people. The word translated ‘ungrudgingly’ come from the original Greek word which means to not find fault. To the sincere supplicant, not matter the state of their life, God will not hold back His generous gifts, especially wisdom.

v. 6: **ask in faith, with no doubting**...

Just as God does not have a double mind when it comes to giving to His people, He also does not want His people to approach Him with a double mind, plagued by doubt, lack of faith or ulterior motivations. For God’s people to come with a double mind means they do not understand the nature of God. James is not criticizing the human struggle with doubt but the insincerity of people who are “seeking to serve two masters” (Matthew 6.24).

the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind... James, like the pastor and preacher, gives his audience a sermon illustration of

what a doubting person is like. Bo Reicke argues this images centers on “the instability of the whole personality under the influence of changing circumstances.” Life is precarious enough without the invite into the place where only God should occupy. As followers of Jesus we should not be like waves tossed to and fro between faith and doubt, trust and fear, single-minded obedience and double-minded spiritual schizophrenia.

v.7: **that person must not suppose that he will receive anything...** Fair-weather Christians cannot expect God to answer their insincere requests because they have not given their hearts undivided to Jesus. James will return to respond to these wave tossed Christians in 4.3 why their prayers go unfulfilled.

v. 8: **double-minded...** To be double minded in the Greek is to have two souls, a person who is split in half, someone who is ever vacillating back and forth. James is the only NT author to use this word, which he returns to in 4.8, as he urges the double-minded to draw near to God as they clean their hands and purify their hearts, believing that God will also draw near to them.

unstable in all his ways... James is the only biblical author to use the word translated here as unstable. The term translated ‘unstable’ comes from the negation of the verb ‘to set in order.’ The word, therefore, carries the idea of restlessness and inconstancy. To give us further clarity, it is used in 3.8 of the tongue: no one can tame that which is a restless evil. This unstable tongue is swept up by the chaos of this world, full of deadly poison, and revealing the double mind that speaks both blessings and curses. The instability of the double-minded person should be directly linked to the lack of divine wisdom.

Thursday, July 1..... James 1.9-11

Life in the Mirror of Nature

⁹ Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, ¹⁰ and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. ¹¹ For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and the appearance of its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. James introduces the first everyday situation facing the Jewish Christians scattered across the Roman Empire. What is it?

2. How is the low social standing of many poor Christians affecting their view of the rich around them?

3. Reflect on the contrast drawn by James out of Jesus' teaching. Read these verses in light of the Rich Man and Lazarus parable (Luke 16.19-31). How are James' words based on Jesus' parable?

4. The illustration of wildflowers and grass is a common one in Scripture:
 - c. How does the psalmist understand his life like grass (Psalm 102)?

 - d. How does David understand the humanity before God (Psalm 103)?

 - e. Isaiah tells us all humanity is like grass. In contrast what is eternal (Isaiah 40.6-8)?

 - f. How does Peter apply Isaiah's words to call us to holiness (1 Peter 1:22-24)?

5. How can wealth and financial comfort be a temptation for Christians? How does James encourage the rich to take off the burden of this world?

6. How did James and the church in Jerusalem seek to apply this understanding of wealth (Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-35)?

• PRAYER POINT •

LIVING IN THE GREAT REVERSAL

- Ask God where envy may be creeping into your heart as you see the wealth of others. Take this opportunity to praise Him for His love and the great work He is doing in your life.
- Ask God where you've begun to rely on your wealth rather than on God. Be brave enough to invite the Lord back into your riches and place them at His disposal.

COMMENTARY

v. 9: **Let boast...** With the verb 'to boast' James calls two distinct groups of people personified by one individual each: the lowly brother and the rich person. Through boasting he calls them, as Chris Vlachos states, "to embrace their opposite states of reality."

Vlachos highlights the use of the word for 'boast' here in the Greek translation used by the early Church (the Septuagint) in Psalm 149.5, linking this form of boasting with the idea of joy. This makes sense and connects the wise Christians who 'consider it all joy when you meet trials of various kinds' such as poverty and socio-economic inequality (James 1.2).

the lowly brother... The lowly brother is not called to boast in his lowly state, but in his elevated status before God. The man or woman who is socio-economically lower in status can take pride in the fact that they are dependent on God (who we've seen is single-mindedly generous).

The use of family language – referring to the lowly as a sibling – is important to remember. As Solomon Andria notes, "God has accepted them into his family, and so they occupy a high position."

exaltation... James tells the Jewish Christians who are suffering the trials of socio-economic exclusion in their communities that they are exalted by God. From that height, they have cause for rejoicing. They can glory in their high position within the economy of God's kingdom.

v. 10: **the rich...** Like the lowly Christian brother, the rich person is called to boast paradoxically, not in his material wealth, but in his humiliation...

The corrupting power of wealth is not absent from the Church. After seeing how Barnabas' genuine generosity increased his role in the Jerusalem Church, Ananias and Sapphira attempted to use wealth manipulatively toward that end (Acts 5.1-11). Likewise, Simon Magus tried to buy spiritual authority from the Apostles in Samaria (Acts 8.19-24). Beware those who attempt to direct the movement of the Church through the promise of money and worldly power.

James does not call the rich 'brother' as he does with the lowly. This has caused much speculation by theologians to whether the rich are believers or just the wealthy the Jewish Christians interacted with in life. Considering statements James will make later, perhaps a better understanding would be to focus less on whether the rich are Christians, but rather whether they were behaving like Christ. If the rich are treating the poor unjustly (2.6-7), are they reflecting Christ in their actions?

humiliation... Scot McKnight argues that the humiliation of the rich "is a warning to the wealthy in the Jewish community who use their economic power to create systemic

injustice that their day is coming.” If the rich here are in fact the rich referred to in James 2.7, then their blasphemy against the Lordship of Christ and their oppression of His people will carry severe divine judgment.

because like a flower of the grass he will pass away... James builds another visual image for his audience like with the windswept waves of the double-minded how he illustrates the numbered days of the wealthy like wildflowers. In all their beauty, they quickly emerge and just as quickly fade.

v.11: **its flower falls, and the appearance of its beauty perishes...** The outward appearance of beauty dies with the flower. Any false hope placed in material wealth is proved hollow at death.

So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits... Jesus’ parable of the Rich Fool comes to mind (Luke 12.16-21). The rich man was so busy amassing wealth, with his barns already bursting at the rafters, rather than give generously, he chose to build bigger barns. He was so busy laying up his temporal wealth, he died spiritually impoverished.

Crown of Life Against the Temptation's Cycle to Death

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.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. James 1.12 contains a beatitude (like those given by Christ in His Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5.3–12).
 - g. Who receives God's blessing?
 - h. Why is he or she blessed?
 - i. Describe the blessing promised:
2. Read Jesus' Beatitudes and Woes as recorded in Luke 6.20-26. What similarities in style do you see with how Jesus and James use positive and negative examples?
3. How does James differentiate between trials (positive sense of the word) and temptations (negative sense of the word) in the context of vv. 2-15?
 - j. Trials:
 - k. Temptations:
4. Why is knowing the holy nature of God (that He does not tempt us or cause temptation in our lives) important for James? How is that truth refreshing?
5. What is the progression of desire's temptation to spiritual death found in vv. 14-15?

• PRAYER POINT •

BREAKING THE CYCLE OF TEMPTATION

- Where in your life is temptation leading you to spiritual death? Invite the Holy Spirit to illuminate where you are being drawn away from Christ.
- Celebrate the love of God poured out into your life before you love Him (1 John 4.19). Think about how the Father is calling you to stand on His promise in a season of difficulty.

COMMENTARY

v. 12: **Blessed** is the man... James provides his hearers with a beatitude rooted in the generous character of God with His people. James, like Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount uses the language and form of Moses and the psalmists (see Deuteronomy 33.29; Psalm 1.1; 2.12). In the biblical tradition, the blessed are those in right relationship with God.

remains steadfast... The endurance under temporary trials in lives of Christians is the track through which God promises to pour out His blessings. The steadfastness with which Jesus' followers will entrust themselves to His strength (consider Psalm 39.7 and 70.5) will lead them to the reward of an everlasting victory. Paul echoes these words rejoicing in his letter to Timothy he has endured; he fought his way through the trials of life, ran the gauntlet of difficulties and persecutions, guarding his faith (2 Timothy 4.7). He is now ready to be awarded an athlete's wreath, a crown justifying that faithful endurance (2 Timothy 4.8). Note that Paul shares his belief with Timothy so that his disciple might be encouraged to keep enduring and laboring under difficult conditions as well (2 Timothy 4.5)

the crown of life... As already alluded to, the crown reminds us of the laurel wreaths awarded winning athletes or successful soldiers returning from battle. The crown itself is a visual reminder of its reward: life. The wearer has been awarded eternal life in God's kingdom (see James 2.5 and Revelation 2.10).

He has promised to those who love him... James establishes the positive response for those who endure trials leaning on God's strength. As Scot McKnight states, their endurance and belief in the Father's promise are dimensions of their love for God.

v. 13: **God cannot be tempted with evil, and He himself tempts no one...** Here James introduces the contrast: God promises eternal life. He does not tempt. He takes a pastoral stance seeking to address a potential growing misconception in the Jewish Christian community that God was causing the temptations of the Church. James refutes this, recognizing God's holy nature—He is not tempted nor does He tempt—after reminding his audience that: 1) God is generously ready to equip His people with wisdom and strength to endure all trials and temptations, and 2) God has promised to bless all His people with eternal life.

v. 14: **each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire...** James leads his audience to ask themselves, "If God is not the source of the internal temptations, then who is?" James provides another visual image to express the answer. He uses hunting and fishing language to describe the proactive force of humanity's deformed desires. God is not the source of temptation in the lives of His image bearers, the source of temptation is found within negative desires of each person. The word translated 'lured' or 'drawn away' is a hunting term to draw out an

animal from its protective space. Likewise, the word for 'enticed' is a fishing term to bait a hook. These actions – luring and enticing – are sourced from our own distorted longings which do not center on Christ.

James' description of one's corrupted desires drawing away the righteous would remind his Jewish audience of the immoral woman in Proverbs 5-9 who is contrasted with Lady Wisdom.

v. 15: **desire...conceived gives birth to sin, and sin...fully grown brings forth death...** This is an odd metaphor, a lifecycle of death that should be contrasted with the progression of the faithful who endure all kinds of trials that give birth to perfection, completeness and abundance in eternal life (see 1.2, 12). Here fallen desires incubate and give birth to sin, which grows and consumes its host to achieve full maturity: death. This is a classic teaching form in the early church often referred to as a 'didache,' meaning the two ways – one which leads to life and the other which leads to death.