

# Wandering from the Truth

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 04 October 2009

Preacher: David MacPherson

[ 0 : 0 0 ] Those who are avid readers of the newsletter, as I'm sure you all are, may have noticed that we have in the current newsletter that was just available today the preaching plan for this month, for October, and including today. And if you have indeed noticed that, you'll notice that what is indicated there is the following passage in the book of Acts that we would be considering as we follow the book, and that is chapter 8 and verses 1 to 8. Now, there is a change to that, and just for your interest, it's of no great importance, I suppose, the reason, but just for your interest and curiosity, I'll explain the reason for the change. As I turn to the passage, I confess towards the end of the week rather than the beginning, and began to read the verses there to try and get an idea of from what angle I could tackle the passage in question. There seemed to be a particular familiarity with the passage, and I wasn't altogether sure why. There was one verse in particular I thought, well, that verse, that phrase does seem very familiar. And I wondered to myself, is this something I've already preached on? And I came to the conclusion that it probably was.

And then I started getting worried, and I thought, well, have I preached on it here in Bon Accord? And if I were very organized, I would know that immediately. But I'm not. But I turned to the website and to the sermon archives, and sure enough, I discovered that I had, but not in this past year.

But actually, when I came two years ago, when you very kindly invited me to come and to preach with a view, as it's so delicately put. And I realized, oh, well. And I wondered, I wonder what the recollection of the Bon Accord congregation is. Would anybody notice if I preached from the same passage, possibly the same sermon? And I thought, well, perhaps they would. So, what I've decided to do is to jump over that passage. But I'm not actually going to now, this evening, move on to the next part.

I'll leave that for the day that I had originally intended, as indicated in the preaching plan. But if you are particularly interested in the first eight verses of Acts chapter 8, by all means, I direct your attention to the website and the sermon archives there.

Now, as an alternative, as I wondered what that alternative might be, I was drawn to a passage that would seem to complement this morning's sermon. This morning, we were talking about walking in the truth. And this evening, we will consider a passage that speaks about wandering from the truth. Walking in the truth is what we should do, what we ought to do, what we want to do, I trust. But there is another reality, and that is the temptation, the danger that we might wonder from the truth. And it is to this matter that I want us to turn our attention.

[ 3 : 2 6 ] And we will do so from a passage that we can read in James chapter 5. So, please do turn with me to James chapter 5 and we'll read from verse 13.

James chapter 5. It's on page 1216. And we'll read from verse 13 through to the end of the chapter.

James chapter 5 and verse 13. Is anyone of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.

Is anyone of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well.

The Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crop. Then particularly these final two verses.

[ 4 : 54 ] My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this, whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins. The Word of God.

As James comes to the end of his letter, does he finish with a stirring call to reach out with the gospel to the nations? No. Rather, his concern is not with reaching out, but with keeping in, keeping everybody on board and on course. And we too ignore this duty at our peril, this proneness to wonder that James refers to and warns concerning. If one of you should wander from the truth, this proneness to wonder is a prevalent and, I suspect, permanent feature of congregational life of any congregation. One way that this is sometimes illustrated is if you have a look, I can think of occasions when I've had a look at a photograph of a group of young people, say, at a retreat or a youth conference or a camp, and perhaps several years have passed, and we try and remember all who are there in the photograph and think, now, where are they now?

And it is sometimes quite a sad task as we notice that all those who, at that time, were very enthusiastic in the faith, very committed, yet now, they have wondered, no longer participating in a Christian congregation, no longer showing evidence, at any rate, of a concern for spiritual things. And they've wondered. I remember just, I guess, just over a year ago when I had the opportunity to speak at the youth fellowship in the congregation in Moyabamba for what I knew would be the last time, at least for a long time. And we had the young folk round at the house. There was a group of maybe 30 or so, I can't remember. And at the beginning of our time together, I took a picture of the group. I asked them to gather round and I wanted to take a picture.

And I imagine they thought, well, this would be for me to have a souvenir, something to remind me of them. And in part, that was the reason. But the actual specific reason was that having taken the picture and then showing it to them, I asked them this question. I said to them, when I come back, say in five years for the sake of argument, there's no great message there in giving that time frame.

But when I come back and I have this photograph, I wonder how many of you in this photograph will still be serving God, will still be faithful to the Lord. I wonder how many of you will have wondered. I wonder how many of you will have turned aside and turned back from the way. Now, I hope and pray that none of them, but if experience is anything to go by, it is reasonable to fear and to presume that quite a number will have wandered from the truth. So, let's consider this matter, this danger, this reality that James turns to as he closes this letter of wandering from the truth. And we can pose three questions and answer each in turn. First of all, who is at risk? Who might wander from the truth?

[ 9 : 03 ] As on the basis of what James says here in this passage. And then, to consider briefly, what does it involve? What does it look like? How do we wander from the truth? And then finally, we have here very clear instructions as to what to do as we are conscious of those wandering from the truth. What to do and why?

These are the matters that we want to consider. First of all, then, who's at risk? Well, there we read in verse 19 of James chapter 5, my brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth. My brothers, James is addressing the Christian community. He is addressing believers. He is speaking to those who profess faith in Jesus Christ. And it is such who are at risk of wandering from the truth. Now, we might say, well, that's self-evident. As only those who have been walking in the truth, to use the language of this morning, can then wander from the truth. If you've never known the truth, then you can't wander from it.

So, that shouldn't surprise us that James identifies the believers, those who profess faith, those who know the truth, as those who are at risk of wandering from the truth. But we can maybe develop this just a little further and say that those who are at risk are not simply believers generally, but we can say any believer. The language of James has that implication. My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth, or as other versions express it, if anyone among you should wander from the truth.

If anyone among you should wander from the truth. None are immune from this possibility. None can say that, well, that's never going to happen to me. None can say, well, that is not a temptation for me. I am sure that I will reach the very end and never wander from the truth. No, you are included. You are also one who could wander from the truth, who could be tempted to wander from the truth.

So, before we go any further, it is an opportune moment for us to examine ourselves. And as we continue considering this matter, as we consider it, that could serve as an opportunity for examination.

[ 11 : 48 ] Maybe we are wandering from the truth, even now. Maybe it's not a future danger, but something that is a present reality for some of us here this evening. We are all at risk, we might say. And not only should we be conscious of that for ourselves, but we also should be careful not to think that others are able to be put in categories. And we might say, well, yeah, I can imagine he or she might wander from the truth, but, oh, I don't think they would. I can't imagine they would ever fall into that trap. We shouldn't assume that some Christians are safe from this danger. So, that then, just very briefly to highlight who's at risk. And the fundamental answer is anyone, anyone, any believer, all those who profess faith are prone to this danger. But perhaps more importantly, and on which we'll have to spend a little more time, what does it involve, this wandering from the truth? My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, what does it involve? Well, I think the word wander, it gives us an idea of what is involved. It's the same word that's used in the passage in Matthew's Gospel in chapter 18 that we read earlier on in the service that speaks of a sheep going astray, of wandering from the flock. And the word wander, as we would consider its meaning in this particular context here in James, would suggest to us that what is being described, first of all, is not some violent breaking of a commitment to the church or to Jesus Christ. What is being presented here is not something that is likely to be a very sudden or dramatic change of direction. That very word, that very verb, to wander, suggests something different. It's not violent, it's not sudden, it's not dramatic. There may be those who abandon the faith in a sudden and dramatic way. That can happen. It's quite unusual, but it can happen. But that is not what

James is considering here. He is considering those who wander from the truth. Indeed, wandering from the truth can be something that you can do in a way that is not obvious or visible even to oneself, even to the one who is wandering. It is possible to wander and not even realize that that is happening. And if we ourselves have difficulty in recognizing this reality in ourselves, how much more those around us who are looking on.

So, not a violent or sudden or dramatic abandoning of the ways of God, of the gospel way, but rather that the picture here, the picture of wandering, is a picture of gentle strain, of inconspicuous drifting from the way. And that really brings us to another matter to consider. What is it that we drift from? What is it that we wander from? Well, the verse speaks of wandering from the truth. Wandering from the truth. And I think when we first read that, somebody who wanders from the truth, we may, I don't know if this is true of you, but you may, as I tend to imagine when I read that, that, well, we think of doctrine, to wander from the truth.

But as we were considering this morning, the truth is not only a set of doctrines, but the truth is that which we walk in. The truth has a practical, ethical, lifestyle dimension. And so, to wander from the truth is something to do with those matters of how we live, of the lives we live. Now, that is explicitly made clear in the passage, and particularly in verse 20, where it speaks of bringing somebody back.

Because there in verse 20, we read, remember this, whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way. And the picture of the way is a picture of lifestyle, of how we live, and not simply what we believe.

[ 16 : 37 ] So, from this we can conclude, I think, justifiably, that this wandering that James speaks of will seldom be seen in the rejection or questioning of a core doctrine. That may happen. But ordinarily, that will not be the issue. Those who wander from the truth will not be those who ordinarily will say, well, the reason for it is that I no longer believe what I used to believe. They're unlikely to say, well, I have this real problem with this doctrine that is taught, and for that reason, I am now living in another way. That is not likely to be the situation of most. The wandering that James refers to takes other forms. We can wonder, just to give a few examples, we can wonder in our commitment to the church where God has placed us. Where in the past we were enthusiastically involved in a committed way, in the public services of worship, and in opportunities for ministry, and we slowly and inconspicuously wander in that commitment. It's not as it used to be, and we maybe even have difficulty of identifying, well, when did that happen? When did things begin to cool in this matter?

We wonder. We wonder in this commitment to the church. We can wonder also as we grow weary in doing good, to use the language of Paul in his letter to the Galatians. And as we are presented with opportunities to serve and to do good to others, it just seems a tiresome thing. It seems just too much effort. And we say, yes, well, it would be good to do that, and it would be a good thing to get involved, but it just seems a bit too much. And we're weary of doing good. We don't reject the very suggestion. We're not opposed to the good that could be done, but we're weary. And that perhaps is another way in which we can wander from the truth. We can wander in the fulfilling of our domestic duties and responsibilities as parents, as wives, as husbands, in the spiritual leadership in our homes. We can wander.

We don't abandon the faith. We don't tell our children that we no longer believe these things. No, quite the contrary. But we wander in the careful fulfilling of our duties in different spheres of our lives. We can also wander morally. We can begin to tolerate and even to enjoy that which displeases God.

We can carelessly fill our minds with that which God does not approve of as we slouch in front of the television after a long day and we're tired and we turn off all attempt to discern or to consider that which is helpful to us and good for us. And we wander. Perhaps there are things that we will watch and enjoy that if we're honest we would say, well, five years ago, ten years ago we would never even have thought of filling our minds with those things. We wander. We can be careless in our commitment to truth. We suddenly find ourselves just being not altogether honest in our dealings. We're maybe not guilty of shamefaced lies, but we just are that bit more willing to present the truth in a way that is more favorable to us or to leave aside those aspects of truth that will do us some harm. And we are simply just that little bit more careless on that matter. And other examples could be given of how we can wander immorally. We're not talking about gross public sin. We're talking about little things, so it would seem, but that give evidence of wandering from the truth. We can wander in the practice and exercise of personal devotions and of spiritual disciplines, of prayer and of study and meditation in the Word.

So in other days and days gone by, we were careful concerning these duties. They had a priority in our day and in our lives. But we wandered. It didn't happen overnight. We never decided to no longer do these things. We've simply wandered in exercising these duties over time.

[ 21 : 32 ] My brothers, if one of you should wonder from the truth. And as we've suggested ways in which that can be true of us, can we examine ourselves and ask, are we wandering from the truth? Have we wandered from the truth in some measure in our own lives, in our own pilgrimage, in our own walk with and for God?

Well, that would bring us on to the third question that we want to consider, the final question. It's actually two questions, but we've presented it as one question. What to do and why? So as you see, there are two questions, really. What to do and why? Well, James gives us instruction in this regard.

Then in verse 19 and 20, we'll just read them again. My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back. Remember this, whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins. Verse 20 speaks of turning a sinner from the error of his way.

The idea is to turn back. The idea is to turn back. That's the language used in verse 19. If someone should bring him back. This is what is involved. This is what we are to do. This should be our concern, to bring back the one who is wandering. This verb translated turn in verse 20. Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way that has this meaning of turning around or turning back or bringing back.

It's the same verb that is used by Jesus as he anticipates Peter coming back following his denial of Christ. And Jesus anticipates that happy occasion when Peter, having let his Savior down, will be brought back, will turn back. And having been brought back, will feed the brethren, will serve the brethren. So, what are we to do? Well, what this instruction we find here in this passage tells us is that our natural instinct as Christians, our natural inclination as the church, involves not throwing out the erring brother, but bringing back. That is our first port of call. That is our first priority, to bring back rather than to cast out. The biblical imperative is to be as inclusive as possible. Where we use the word inclusive not in its coded meaning that it's sometimes used today, but in its literal meaning. We want to include people in as much as is possible. That is our great desire that if somebody has sinned, if somebody has fallen, if somebody has backslidden, if somebody has wandered, what we want to do is to bring them back. That is the concern. James doesn't say if somebody has wandered from the truth, then have nothing to do with them. If somebody has wandered from the truth, they're traitors to the cause and have nothing to do with them. No, he says bring them back.

[ 24 : 57 ] Bring them back. That is what you should be concerned to do. The view that suggests that the more exclusive we are, the more faithful we are, is nothing less than an ugly perversion of the truth. But this view is sometimes expounded that the more we exclude those who aren't deemed to be at the level required, then we are more faithful to God. That is not what we find here. If there is one who is wandering, if there is one who has failed his master, well, do all that you can to bring him back. That is our concern, or should be our concern. Now, before just thinking very briefly what this involves, we can note who is responsible for this. Who is to bring back the wanderer? Who is to take responsibility for this?

Well, again, the passage helps us. In verse 20, we read, remember this, whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way. In other words, anyone, any Christian, any believer, anybody who forms part of that community of faith, of the congregation, anyone is able to perform this duty. This is not the exclusive responsibility of the minister or the elder or somebody in leadership. No, whoever, whoever is able to do so, whoever cares enough to do so, anyone can involve themselves in this very important pastoral duty.

Some might say, as we think about somebody who has wandered from the truth, and you might say, or you might think, well, it's none of my business. His private life, what he does, what he doesn't do, that's his business. It's none of my business. But if he is part of the fellowship that you are part of, then he or she is very much your business. But what's involved? If we are to be involved in a meaningful way in this duty that is commended to us, to bring back those who wander, to turn a sinner from the error of his way, what will be involved? Well, I think there's a couple of things that we would highlight. And first of all, it will be necessary for us to know people. Because this wandering, as we've already suggested, it can be a very subtle thing. You won't notice if you're not involved with people. We won't notice if we don't actually know people well. It will be possible for folk to wander very far, and we will be oblivious to it if we don't know each other. It's possible.

And it's not simply possible. It happens that some may drift very far from the truth and still be in church every Sunday. Now, some, their wandering will be reflected in not attending as regularly, or indeed abandoning attendance at public worship. That may be true of some, but others will continue to come. We might say faithfully, week in, week out, but they are wandering far away from the truth.

And if we don't know them, then we will be oblivious to their spiritual crisis, to the spiritual problem that they are going through. We will think they're fine, faithful members of the congregation.

[ 28 : 39 ] We need to know people. One of the reasons why we want to, as a congregation, to cultivate and to develop a network of neighborhood home fellowships across the city, and indeed across the catchment area of this congregation, is precisely because we hope and trust that that will help us to know each other better. And so, be more sensitive to the problems that others might be going through. Be able to identify in a loving way those who are wandering from the truth. And indeed, when we wander, have the privilege and the blessing of others noting that and helping us and bringing us back into the way that we should go.

So, what's involved in bringing people back? Well, first of all, we need to know people. If we don't know people, we may not even notice. Or by the time we do notice, it will be too late. How many of you have experienced this? When maybe in conversation, somebody makes mention of somebody and you say, well, now, I don't think I've seen him for a while. It must be two or three weeks or a month, and then it turns out that it's actually four months or six months or eight months, and you hadn't noticed.

And you think, well, what could we do? And now, in God's grace, maybe even at that stage, it's possible to do something. But perhaps on other occasions, too much time has passed, and the task of bringing back will be all the more difficult. So, we need to know people. But the other thing, of course, is that if we do know people and we do identify this problem, then we need to do something.

And what do we do? Well, that will depend on the person and the circumstances. We may visit the person concerned. We may try to seek an opportunity to speak to them. We may write to them. We may phone them. We may send them an email or a text message or whatever means of communication we think appropriate. We will try and inquire gently and sensitively as to where they are and what difficulties they may be facing. Where necessary, we may have to point out that which is wrong in their conduct. We think of the words that we read in the book of Proverbs, better is open rebuke than hidden love. Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses. We think we're being friendly by not being honest in speaking to somebody about a fault in which they may have fallen or ways in which they may be wandering from the truth. But far from being an act of love, our silence is rather a demonstration of a lack of concern. Of course, to do something and to exhort and to encourage and indeed to correct others is not an easy thing. It requires, I think, first of all, love.

But together with love, courage and certainly great wisdom. We can think of that matter of the wisdom that we need as we read what James says in the previous chapter, in chapter 3 and verse 17.

[ 32 : 00 ] And this is the kind of wisdom we need. James chapter 3 and verse 17. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure, then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. If we have that kind of wisdom, then we will be able to approach and to speak to and to exhort those who are wandering from the truth. Finally, we can answer the question or try and answer the question, why should we do this? And James gives us an answer to that question. There in verse 20, we're told, whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins. There are two reasons given here. There are two reasons given here. That bringing back a sinner from the error of his ways, bringing back a wandering brother will save him from death. Literally save his soul or save a soul from death. And secondly, we're told that so doing will cover over a multitude of sins.

Now, this creates some difficulties for us. But what is being said here? Is the Christian, we have already made the point that James is addressing the brethren, he's addressing professing Christians. Is it the case that a Christian who wanders from the truth is at risk of death, and particularly spiritual death, which presumably is the death that is being spoken of here?

That would seem to be the clear implication. He is at risk of spiritual death. Now, how does that sit with our understanding concerning the perseverance of the saints? How do we understand this danger that James is identifying? Perhaps the best I can do is to quote one commentator on this matter who I think hits the nail on the head as to what is being said here. So, I'll simply read this quote, and I hope it is self-explanatory. This language that is used concerning saving a soul from death or saving this wanderer from death is, I quote, not written from the point of view of what God knows about us, nor from the point of view of what we know about ourselves, but from the point of view of our fellow Christians, observing our lives and hearing our talk. To them who are observing us, the evidence of backsliding or wandering in our lives must call in question whether we are truly Christ's or not.

So, the issue isn't whether we are or are not. The issue is that those who look on have no reason or no way of knowing definitively. And so, they must be concerned that if we are indeed wandering from the truth, if we are abandoning a Christian lifestyle and adopting one that is displeasing to God, well, the wages of sin is death. They must look on and say, well, there seems to be in this one who I love and care for a danger of death. They make no judgment as to whether such a person is saved or definitively a Christian and so safe from spiritual death. They simply see what they see and act lovingly on that basis.

Hence, this language that one who brings back a sinner from the error of his ways will save him from death. I hope that was sufficiently clear. But the other consequence that we're told, another reason why we would bring a sinner back is that in so doing, we cover over a multitude of sins.

[ 36 : 03 ] As to this matter of sins being covered over, I think the clear implication here is that the one who is brought back will repent of his sins. As a brother brings him back, as a brother lovingly and sensitively helps him to see the error of his ways and the manner in which he has been wandering, then that person will repent of his sins and so consequently will enjoy the forgiveness of those sins. Those sins will be covered over, whatever they are, and however great they may be. The covering over that is spoken of here is not the action of the one who restores the sinner, the one who brings them back, but rather the covering over of a multitude of sins is the result of the restoration. The brother restored repents of his sin, seeks forgiveness, seeks forgiveness, and is granted the forgiveness that God is ever willing to grant a repentant sinner. And so there we are given reasons of great weight and import for us to be engaged in this pastoral duty to bring back, to turn a sinner from the error of his way.

Well, as we conclude, and as we think and as we look to the future and consider the manner in which we as a congregation must fulfill our missionary mandate to reach out with the gospel to the lost outside, the teaching we received this evening from James is that we should not, as we seek to do that, be careless with regard to our duty to keep in those who are on the inside. So may we in parallel fulfill both of these our responsibilities. Let us pray.