



AWAKEN TO ACTION

April 25 | Devotionals

Day 1 – Devotion

Imagine for a moment what it would be like if you were a part of a play. Maybe it's Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams. Imagine that you and everyone in the cast studied, memorized, and rehearsed as best you could and after months of preparation, opening night arrives. There are obvious jitters and butterflies, but the time has come. Everyone gets in position. The lights go down. The curtain opens.

Next, picture what it'd be like if everyone knew the right lines or music but when it came time to actually put their knowledge into practice, they *blanked*. The lights go down, the curtain opens, and the person who is supposed to begin everything totally spaces his lines. And not just him, but the second person does it too. Then a third person. Then a fourth. It's a complete disaster. All that studying and memorizing for *nothing*.

That'd be embarrassing, right? What would that say about your cast and their commitment to the musical? What would that say about your director? Not very good things.

Now, let's imagine again for a moment what it'd be like if you and everyone else in the cast never studied the play's lines. Opening night comes. Everyone is in position. The lights go down. The curtain opens. THIS time, because you don't know any of the lines you're supposed to say, and because you've got to say *something*, you begin to just go with what you know. So you start spouting off lines from a past play that you were in. You're putting knowledge into practice, it's just the wrong knowledge.

Again, I'm sure it'd be pretty embarrassing, right? It'd say something about your commitment to acting, about you, and about your director. And again the headlines in the local paper give you no grace.

This may be a silly illustration, but there is something in this that corresponds to what James is trying to relay to us in **James 1:19-2:26**. In this section of James' letter, he is trying to get us to realize the importance of both *knowing* God's Word and *doing* God's Word.

He tells us in **James 1:21** to "Receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls. Then, one verse later (**verse 22**), he says, "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only..."

In the land of plays and musicals, it is imperative that one both *know* their lines and *do* their lines well. Or else, what's the point? The same is true in our faith journey. Like two pedals on a bike, knowing and doing go hand in hand. If you have only the right-side bike pedal, you'll spin yourself around in circles. If you only have the left-side bike pedal, you'll again spin yourself in circles. You need both a right-side and left-side pedal.

James understands this. He knows that essential to faithful Christian witness (not to *earn* our salvation, but as a result of our salvation) is both *knowing* God's Word as well as *doing* God's Word. He knows that only knowing or only doing results in us spinning ourselves in circles.

If we only *know* God's Word, but don't practice it then what does that say about our commitment to Jesus? What does that say about God when his followers don't live the way that we're supposed to? James says in **James 2:14**, "What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?" And in **verse 26**, "Faith apart from works is dead."

Likewise, what does it say when followers of Jesus go out and "do" things, but don't do it with any sort of knowledge to back up their doing? How do they know they're doing what is true, what is good, what is beautiful? How do we know we're not just following along with what culture thinks is appropriate? Do we just live and serve in ways *we think* are right and good or would it be worth our while to search God's Word for insight into how to live properly?

It's good food for thought. As a church, we want to heed James' words. We want to be hearers *AND* doers. What about you?

Questions for reflection:

1. When you think about "knowing" vs. "doing" which of these do you lean into more than the other? Why do you think that is?

2. What might being a more faithful "doer" of the Word look like for you? What might being a more faithful "knower" of the Word look like for you?

3. Write a prayer to God asking him for help in both knowing and doing. Ask him for open eyes and ears to His Word. Ask him to allow you to see places where you can put God's Word into practice personally and in the service of others too.

Day 2 – James Study Breakdown

Today, we'll be doing a bit of a breakdown of some key words and phrases in this section of James. Hopefully, this will equip you with some linguistic, cultural, and historical context so that you can better understand what James is trying to convey to us as followers of Jesus.

In our section of James (**James 1:19-2:26**), the conversation will be shifting away from finding joy in suffering, having faith amidst doubt, and avoiding sin and temptation. Now, he's going to be sharing about our words and God's Word, partiality's role in the Kingdom of God, and faith's relationship to works.

“My dear brothers and sisters”

In **James 1:19**, James begins by saying, “My dear brothers and sisters...” It would be easy to gloss over this word “dear,” but it's important. The *English Standard Version* renders “dear” in **James 1:19** as “Beloved.” Why? Well, in the Greek text, James actually uses a form of the word *agape*.

Agape is the Greek word for “love.” But what does this word mean *exactly*? Because we use the word “love” in all kinds of ways. We love our moms and we love pizza. But we don't (hopefully) love those two things the same. *Agape* means *to will the good of another* without any sort of expectation of getting anything in return. It is the kind of love that is action-oriented, not feeling-oriented. See for example **Romans 5:8**: “But God demonstrates his own *agape* for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (see also **1 John 4:9**).

Here, in **James 1:19**, James is reminding us that WE are the *agape-d* ones, the ones whom God has died for. This, in turn, gives us the motivation to have joy in suffering, to exercise faith despite doubt, to fight sin and temptation, and to do everything that he is going to continue to talk about in the rest of his letter.

Our beloved-ness is accomplished prior to anything we do. We don't act in order to earn God's love. Being loved is the fuel for living in the way of Jesus.

“Word”

James exhorts us in this section to “humbly receive the **word** planted in you” (**1:21**), to “do” the **word** (**1:22**), to use our words carefully by keeping a “tight rein” on them (**1:26**), and, earlier in James, he told us that God chose to give us birth through the “word of truth” (**1:18**). So what's with the emphasis on “word?”

If you think about it, words change things. Words don't just convey information. They shape reality. Even Isaiah says as much in **Isaiah 55:10-11** by saying that God's words are like seeds planted which in turn produce beautiful vegetation. Our whole reality is shaped and formed by language. And language has the ability to cultivate either a semblance of heaven or a semblance of hell here on earth (see **James 3:6**).

That's why James tells us to not just be hearers of God's word, but to be doers. He wants us to conform our lives to God's word (what he later calls God's "law") because it is the word of God that leads us to true freedom (**1:25**).

"Religion"

James uses the word "religion" (in Greek: *thréskeia*) twice in our section of Scripture this week. He uses it once in **verse 26** and once in **verse 27**.

In James' day, "religion" was something everyone had. There really wasn't such a thing as "non-religious" people. Everyone believed in the 'gods.' To name a few, James had people around him who believed in one God who created everything (the Jews), James had people around him who believed that God or the gods created everything and then set everything into motion without any more involvement to just let things play out (the Epicureans), and James had people who believed the divine was infused into all of life like a sort of pantheism (the Stoics).

It's into this milieu, that James says, "No, none of those quite hit the mark." True religion for James centers on one Creator God (like the Jews), revealed in Jesus the Messiah (unlike the Jews), that is involved in this world (unlike the Epicureans), but is still different than it (unlike the Stoics). All of that is theological background to James confession to be a servant of God and of Jesus Christ in **James 1:1**.

For James, religion is characterized by this belief, but that belief is also characterized by action. True religion for James is manifested in holiness (**James 1:19, 21, 27, etc.**) and acts of compassion (**James 1:27**) – everything from the words that come out of your mouth to caring for widows and orphans.

"Favoritism"

James continues his discussion of hearing and doing and of pure religion by talking about what that looks like on the ground. One barrier that he knows people often have in exercising true religion is what he calls "not showing favoritism" (**James 2:1**).

James knows that God himself shows no partiality and accepts no bribes (**Deuteronomy 10:17**). James knows that it is so easy to want to love and serve those who might be able to reward you or repay you for your service (i.e. the rich or wealthy), but this kind of thinking has no place in God's Kingdom.

If God shows no favoritism, neither should we towards those we would help and love (**Romans 2:11; Ephesians 6:9**).

"Faith and works"

The last couple of words we'll look at is this idea of "faith and works." Much has been written about faith's relationship to works. So, let's just begin with something similar to what was stated about our "Belovedness": As Christians, we do not work to earn our salvation, but we do works as a sign of our salvation.

Works *are* important though! James asks us if we have faith without works, then how is that any different from evil spirits like demons? As spirits, they *believe* in God (**see James 2:19**). So what's the difference? The Greek word for "faith" is *pistis*. This word could maybe be better rendered as "trust" or even "allegiance." When you truly trust something, you'll live and act in accordance with that trust. Or, similarly, if you're allegiant to someone or something, you'll base your entire life on that person or thing (*Think about how you trust your car's ability to get you from point A to point B. You aren't just content with that thought. You put that thought into action. You get in your car, turn the key over, back out of your driveway, and drive it to where you want to go. Your trust in the car undergirds your driving of it!*).

So for James, some people can say they believe in God and have faith, but really they don't IF they do not have actions to coincide with their beliefs. What they have is all talk and talk is cheap.

Questions for reflection:

1. Which one of these bible study breakdown sections stood out or resonated with you the most?
2. What new questions do you have as a result of today's thoughts?
3. How do you sense God challenging you to change as a result of these breakdowns?

Day 3 – Scripture Survey

Today, we'll be looking at a few verses that will help us dig into what James is talking about in **James 1:19-2:26**. For today, read through James 1:19-2:26 and then look up the following passages. Under each passage, note any similarities you find between it and our James passage this week. Finally, ask, "God, what are you inviting me into as I read and look through these verses?"

1 Peter 1:22-2:3

Ephesians 4:26-27

Acts 10:34-43

Zechariah 7:9-10

Mark 9:33-37

Day 4 – Story Work

You have a story of awakening. Maybe for you that looked a lot like James or Paul where Jesus changed everything in your life in an instant. Or maybe you've always had a constant awaken-ing. As you've gotten older, you've had your eyes opened more and more to who Jesus is and how that impacts your life.

Just like last week, we're going to lean into how God has been writing and shaping our stories – this week, with an emphasis on ACTION.

Read and reflect on your story using the questions below. Use them as prompts as you remember how God has been cultivating a heart of action and service for others.

1. As you look back over your life, have there been instances God has given you an opportunity for action (maybe an open door to serve someone in need), but you didn't follow through? What were they? When was a time that you did?

2. How has action been present in your life since Jesus became real to you?

3. In what ways have Jesus' actions (i.e. his miracles or his crucifixion) shaped your view of him?

Day 5 – Hear & Do

For this last day, let's slow down and pay attention to what God is inviting us into as a result of this week's passage. Find a quiet space. Silence any technology around you. Spend some time reviewing your devotions this week. We want to be hearers of God's Word and we want to be doers of God's Word. Jot down your thoughts to the following reflection questions:

As you look over this week, what words, phrases, Scriptures, etc. have stood out to you? What was the most significant thing? Why?

Where else outside of your devo time did you notice "these things" pop up in your week?

What is God inviting you to DO as a response to this week's reflections?