

James 4:5 - A Rather Difficult Verse

On very rare occasions in our reading of the New Testament, we run across a verse or verses that are really hard to deal with translation wise. This normally leads to variations between our favorite English translations that may leave us wondering what the real meaning might be. One such verse exists in James' epistle, James 4:5. One commentator, J. Alec Motyer, says this regarding the verse "James 4:5 is a minefield of unsolved problems for the expositor, and yet there is a wide sense in which both the place of the verse in James' argument and the thrust of what he is teaching are plain."¹

I believe Motyer is correct in all that he says. In the next few pages, we will attempt to unpack James 4:5 and lend some understanding both based on the Greek and especially, the context in which we find the verse. Let's begin with a look at the verses surrounding James 4:5.

James 4:1–10 (NASB 2020)

Things to Avoid

¹ What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is the source not your pleasures that wage war in your body's parts? ² You lust and do not have, *so* you commit murder. And you are envious and cannot obtain, *so* you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask with the wrong motives, so that you may spend *what you request* on your pleasures. ⁴ You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you think that the Scripture says to no purpose, "He jealously desires the Spirit whom He has made to dwell in us"? ⁶ But He gives a greater grace. Therefore *it* says, "GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE." ⁷ Submit therefore to God. But resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Come close to God and He will come close to you. Cleanse *your* hands, you sinners; and purify *your* hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Be miserable, and mourn, and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy into gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.

James opens with a rhetorical question; "What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you?" He then immediately supplies the answer by way of another question; "Is the source not your pleasures that wage war in your body's parts?" The answer is basically "self" but in a little more detail he brings out a point that we many times do not really consider. It is the parts of our body that are the actual root of the "self" problem. These are the parts of our being that are really what is driving self. If we were only heads and had no hands to hold things, no parts of our bodies that gave us pleasure, no need for things because we could not use them, we would be much more easily satisfied and far less prone to falling to temptation.

In one translation the answer reads: "Do they not come from here, from the desires at war in your organs?"² Of course, one of the biggest troublemakers is what we call the heart – not the organ but rather the emotion. In this case, what that means is our mind is being a slave to the rest of the parts of our body including our emotions. We are wanting to feel good, so it provides the desires behind

¹ J. A. Motyer, [*The Message of James: The Tests of Faith*](#), The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 147.

² A. K. M. Adam, [*James: A Handbook on the Greek Text*](#), ed. Martin M. Culy, Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), 75.

all that. The eyes see things and because they are desirable to the heart (mind or other parts) we want them. Then we have to control that desire and properly evaluate whether what we see and want is proper for us to have and at what cost.

In all this, James provides some pretty strong results, murder, fights, and quarrels. Then he really calls out a problem – asking God to give us income so we can spend it to acquire all these things we desire. He finally calls those who are this way adulteresses. This whole passage is a super strong inditement of living as Christians but, as James puts it, “having a friendship with the world.”

We all sit here and say to ourselves “that’s not me – I’m not like that” and I would absolutely agree. To the degree that James describes these folks, we are probably not them. However, do you think we could raise our hands just a little bit and maybe some small areas? This is one of those places where James is doing what I call “meddling” or perhaps “hitting us where it hurts”. Of course, the real gut punch here is that those who fall into this category are “enemies of God.” I can’t think that any of us would ever want to be there.

Now, we get to the problematic verse, verse 5. We begin with the fact that though James clearly states that “Scripture says”, scholars have not been able to identify any passage from which this would originate. Many scholars believe this is not a direct quote, but a summation of principles displayed in scripture. Other possibilities are that he has quoted some other sacred book, or some unknown Greek translation of the Old Testament which we no longer have. For the moment, we can set the origin problem aside.

Even if we knew the origin, the next problem we encounter is in the actual translation of the Greek itself. It is very difficult. As we attempt the translation of the quoted portion we get tangled up in verbs and objects and differences in manuscripts. All that leads to three major questions.

1. Is the word “spirit” referring to the Holy Spirit or our spirit?
2. Who is jealous, God or the Spirit or spirit?
3. If God is jealous then of what, our spirit or the Holy Spirit?
4. Failing to resolve that, we may find that it is our spirit that is jealous or envious.

We are going to look at and briefly analyze three different English translations of this verse, the NASB 2020 which is the translation of the full passage above, the NET (New English Translation), and finally, the NIV 2011 edition. We begin by repeating the NASB 2020 verse 5.

James 4:5 (NASB 2020)

⁵Or do you think that the Scripture says to no purpose, “He jealously desires the Spirit whom He has made to dwell in us”?

There are several things we must point out in this translation. First, to clarify, the word spirit in this translation is capitalized indicating the Holy Spirit. In the NASB, capital “S” on the word spirit always indicates Holy Spirit if it is not the first word of a sentence; obviously, in this translation it is not. For me personally, this is a hard concept to grasp; God being jealous of or desiring the Holy Spirit which He Himself placed within us.

If, however, the word spirit began with a small “s” indicating our own spirit then this would make more sense. However, that is not the case so we have to go with what we have. I’ll leave that as is and let you decide what you think in regard to that rendition.

The next translation is from the NET (New English Translation) Bible ...

James 4:5 (NET 2nd ed.)

⁵ Or do you think the scripture means nothing when it says, “The spirit that God caused to live within us has an envious yearning”?

In this case, spirit is not capitalized so this would be our spirit. Also, in this case, it is our spirit that has the “envious yearning.” Now, if we think about the previous 2 verses 3 and 4, we can see an argument for this being correct contextually.

³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask with the wrong motives, so that you may spend *what you request* on your pleasures. ⁴ You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore, whoever wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

The indication in this translation is not that God is jealous but that our spirit is jealous and envious. This is why we ultimately become friends with the world just as James describes.

For the final translation, the NIV 2011 ...

James 4:5 (NIV)

⁵ Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us.

First, please note that the NIV does not have quotes around the troublesome quote. It treats it as an indirect or summation of what is being said. Second, we see that the word spirit is not capitalized so this would indicate our spirit not the Holy Spirit. The NIV as a rule, capitalizes spirit when referring to the Holy Spirit or Spirit of God. Please note also that the NIV does not normally capitalize the “h” in he or him pronouns when they refer to God. This means in this case we would say that God (he) longs for the spirit (our spirit) which he (God) caused to dwell in us. If you glance back at the previous two verses above with these facts in mind you will see that contextually it makes perfect sense.

The one assumption we must make for this to be contextually correct is that God always wants us back. In some cases, He may abandon us to our sin, but He will always take us back, right? I believe that statement to be true so, we can easily see how God would “jealously long for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us (our spirit not the Holy Spirit).” He does not want us to be friends with the world.

If you look at verses 6-10, there is even further contextual evidence that this is the case.

⁶ But He gives a greater grace. Therefore *it* says, “GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE.” ⁷ Submit therefore to God. But resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Come close to God and He will come close to you. Cleanse *your* hands, you sinners; and purify *your* hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Be miserable, and mourn, and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy into gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.

In these verses James through the Holy Spirit gives us a clear plan to fulfill in order for us to return to God as He desires.

What we just went through is really Textual Criticism at the translation level. It is very rare that we run across such a difficult passage in the New Testament. When we do, it is really good for us to dig in a bit and make sure that, even if we do not have a total understanding of the verse or verses, at least we know where things might be coming from which allows us to formulate for

ourselves a reasonable answer. This of course is much better than just reading over the verse or verses, shrugging our shoulders, and just moving on.

Please note, if you are interested, I have included a summary of the Baylor Handbook of the Greek New Testament (BHGNT) on the treatment of this verse in an addendum at the end of this article.

All three and even other translations are arguably syntactically, semantically, and grammatically correct. Again, a difficult verse to translate. Now, when we look at the following verses, we see that this idea is born out in what James tells us we must do and what God expects.

So, not to leave us hanging, let's take a little more detailed look at the final verses of this passage.

James 4:6–10 (NASB 2020)

⁶ But He gives a greater grace. Therefore *it* says, “GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE.” ⁷ Submit therefore to God. But resist the devil, and he will flee from you. ⁸ Come close to God and He will come close to you. Cleanse *your* hands, you sinners; and purify *your* hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Be miserable, and mourn, and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy into gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.

Of course, first, from this, we can see how God longing for or being jealous for our spirit really fits contextually with what verse 5 is saying as well.

The New KJV puts a title on this passage (verses 7 through 10) which really is appropriate; “*Humility Cures Worldliness.*”³ To say this a little differently, we are supposed to be God's, and we are no longer part of the world and all its pleasures. Lust (implied lust for things of the world) leads, as James tells us in 4:3, to murder, fights and quarrels. Wanting things of the world leads to prayers with wrong motives. He calls these folks “adulteresses” saying that friendship with the world is hostility toward God. All of this describes a spirit within us that is becoming friends with the world. In this state we become enemies of God. All these things are from our self – our spirit if you will – obviously not the Holy Spirit. But, in all this I think there is something wonderful to be seen. James goes on to say in verses 7-10 that if we find ourselves to be like this to any degree at all here is what we should do.

- Submit to God
- Resist the devil
- Come close to God
- Cleanse our hands
- Purify our hearts (double minded)
- Be miserable, mourn, weep
- Let our laughter be turned into mourning, and our joy into gloom. (be miserable??)
- Humble yourselves...

Now, what James has described here is pretty demanding picture. Here's the question to ponder as we close. Is this “a” definition of repentance or, could this be “the only” real definition of repentance? I think in our heart of hearts, we know that this is really the only definition of repentance. God never stops wanting us back, but He always insists that it be on His terms, not ours.

³ [*The New King James Version*](#) (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), Jas 4:7.

ADDENDUM

- 1) BHGNT's reasoning:
- 2) Their first conclusion was concerning the actual subject and verb.
 - a) The two choices are spirit (πνεῦμα) as the subject the verb is then desires or longs () with the modifying adverb jealously (φθόνον). Final wording was then (spirit desire jealously).
 - i) The only problem I had with that was that the earliest manuscripts use the nomina sacra notation for spirit (ΙΙΝΑ) which would indicate Holy Spirit.
 - ii) What little research I did on this said that we are unable to determine if the autographs would have been written in that manner or not. We do know that this definitely was a scribal action from the early second century onward. Considering that, and the fact that using Holy Spirit in this context as the subject or the object was troublesome to me I can definitely go with spirit instead.
 - iii) They point out that if spirit is not the subject, then the construction would have to read "He/God longs or desires jealously for the spirit".
 - b) In this case, it is obvious that spirit would have to be not the Holy Spirit but our spirit.
 - c) Even with that assumption, BHGNT points out that this translation would "require applying an unfavorable characteristic to God."
 - i) What they are considering here is the word which James writes for jealously. James uses (φθόνος) which has more of a negative connotation such as envy, the other (ζήλος) whose semantic range is more favorable is normally used when God is referred to as jealous.
 - ii) For the same reason, we would not think Holy Spirit would be the of the clause as they have translated it "the Holy Spirit that he has made to dwell in us desires jealously."
 - iii) BHGNT further points out the one commentator Luke Timothy Johnson assumes this question to be one expecting a NO answer.
- 3) Johnson (280, 282) resolves the problem here by proposing that the clause here represents a question expecting a negative answer. He soft-pedals the absence of the expected μή at the beginning of the question, a possible but improbable expedient. It is the lack of μή that engenders considerable confusion, which James could have eliminated simply by including that particle (which he has shown elsewhere that he knows to do).⁴
 - i) I agree totally with their conclusion in this case.

⁴ 13 A. K. M. Adam, [James: A Handbook on the Greek Text](#), ed. Martin M. Culy, Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013), 80.