

How Can I Know?, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 11: Falling Away and Coming Home: Restoration

James 5:19–20

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this closing lesson faces the other side of assurance honestly: the real possibility that a child of God can wander from the truth and be lost, and the gracious path of restoration for the one who strays. Drawn from James 5:19–20 and the wider New Testament, it directly and lovingly answers the teaching of 'once saved, always saved.' The teacher must present clearly that the New Testament's warnings against falling away are addressed to genuine believers and would be empty if a saved person could not fall (Galatians 5:4; Hebrews 3:12; 6:4–6; 10:26–31; 2 Peter 2:20–22). The position must also be distinguished from the Calvinistic perseverance of the saints: salvation is gloriously secure for those who continue in faith, while falling away remains a real possibility for those who abandon it. Salvation is preserved through ongoing faith and obedience.

The pastoral task is to hold warning and assurance together so that neither is lost. This truth is not meant to drive the faithful believer, who has spent ten lessons learning to rest, back into anxious dread. The warnings are aimed at keeping the careless from presuming and at calling the straying home, not at robbing the faithful of peace. The teacher should help students see that confidence and watchfulness are compatible, two aspects of a healthy walk, and that true assurance is the confident rest of the faithful, not a guarantee handed to the careless. The lesson must also speak to the shame that keeps wanderers from returning, holding out the Father who runs to meet them.

Beyond the doctrine, aim at formation, and let the tone be that of marveling at the seriousness and grace of God together, not merely winning an argument. The goal is that students leave both watchful over their own hearts and moved to go after the wanderers they know, becoming people and a church oriented toward restoration. The heaviest doctrinal block belongs at Question 9, which answers 'once saved, always saved' from the whole New Testament while keeping the door home wide open. Let that question carry the weight, and let the study end where James ends, on rescue and hope.

Question 1

Student Question:

James writes, "if anyone among you wanders from the truth" (5:19). What does it tell us that James addresses this warning to those 'among you,' and what does the word 'wanders' suggest about how falling away usually happens?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the phrase 'among you.' James writes to 'my brothers,' to the church, and the one who wanders is one of their own. This is not a warning about outsiders who never believed; it is about a member of the believing community who departs from the truth. That alone unsettles the notion that a believer is beyond the possibility of falling.

Examine the word 'wanders.' It pictures not usually a dramatic, sudden renunciation but a drifting, a straying, a gradual losing of the path. People rarely decide in a moment to abandon Christ; they wander, one small step at a time, until they look up and find themselves far from where they began.

Draw out the nature of the truth wandered from. 'The truth' is the gospel and the way of life it calls for. To wander from it can be doctrinal, drifting into error, or moral, drifting into a manner of life that contradicts the faith. Often the two go together, as a straying life seeks out a straying belief to justify it.

Apply it to watchfulness. If wandering is gradual, then watchfulness matters greatly. Small, unaddressed drifts, neglected prayer, missed assembly, a tolerated sin, a cooling love, are the early steps of a longer departure. Recognizing this helps the believer take the first small strayings seriously.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The warning addressed to those 'among you,' members of the believing community
- 'Wandering' as gradual drift rather than usually a sudden renunciation
- Wandering from 'the truth' as both doctrinal and moral straying
- The importance of watchfulness over small, early drifts

Discussion Prompts

- What does it tell us that James warns those 'among you'?
- Why is 'wandering' an apt word for how people usually fall away?
- What small drifts can be the first steps of a longer departure?

Question 2

Student Question:

Falling away usually begins not with a dramatic decision but with small, unguarded drifts. Where do you sense even a slight pull away from the truth in your own life right now, and what would it look like to address it before it grows?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question turns the warning inward before it turns outward. Each of us is capable of wandering, and honesty begins at home. The question asks students to notice the early pull in their own hearts rather than only thinking of others who have strayed.

Help students identify the subtle beginnings. Drift often starts with neglect: prayer that has quietly stopped, the assembly increasingly missed, the Bible unopened, a sin no longer resisted, a bitterness nursed, a love grown cold. None of these feels like abandoning Christ, yet each is a step away.

Normalize honest vigilance without breeding paranoia. The point is not to live in constant terror of falling but to take the small strayings seriously while they are still small, when a course correction is easy. A drift caught early is gently corrected; a drift ignored becomes a long road into the far country.

Encourage a concrete response. Ask students to name one area of slight drift and one specific step to address it this week, a renewed habit, a confessed sin, a restored discipline. Catching and correcting small drifts is itself part of remaining faithful.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Self-examination for the early pull of drift
- The subtle beginnings of wandering: neglect of prayer, assembly, the word, tolerated sin
- Honest vigilance without paralyzing fear
- Early correction of small drifts as part of remaining faithful

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you sense even a slight pull away from the truth right now?
- What small drifts tend to be the first steps for you personally?
- What would it look like to address that drift before it grows?

Question 3

Student Question:

James says the one who wanders must be 'brought back,' and he honors the person who does the bringing (5:19–20). What does this teach about the church's responsibility toward those who have strayed, and why can we not simply leave the wanderer alone?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice that James does not picture the wanderer simply being written off. Someone goes after him and brings him back, and James honors that person's work as saving a soul from death. The church bears a real responsibility for those who stray; we are our brother's keeper.

Explain why we cannot simply leave the wanderer alone. If the soul is genuinely in danger, indifference is not respect for the person's freedom; it is a failure of love. To go after the straying is to take seriously both their worth and their peril. Jesus told of the shepherd who left the ninety-nine to seek the one (Luke 15:4-7).

Address how this restoration is to be done. Scripture calls for it to be done in gentleness and humility, watching ourselves lest we also be tempted (Galatians 6:1), and with patience and truth. Bringing someone back is not harsh pursuit but loving, humble, persistent care.

Apply it to the congregation's life. This calls us out of a comfortable individualism that minds only its own business. The empty seats are not someone else's problem; they are a summons to loving action. Ask who in the body might be drifting now, and who will go after them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The church's real responsibility toward those who stray
- Indifference to a wanderer as a failure of love, not respect for freedom (Luke 15:4-7)
- Restoration done in gentleness, humility, and patience (Galatians 6:1)
- A summons out of comfortable individualism into loving pursuit

Discussion Prompts

- What does this teach about our responsibility toward those who have strayed?
- Why can we not simply leave the wanderer alone in the name of respecting his choice?
- How should the work of bringing someone back actually be carried out?

Question 4

Student Question:

Is there someone you know who has wandered from the faith whom God may be calling you to gently pursue? What has held you back from reaching out, and what would a humble, loving first step look like?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question moves from principle to a particular person. Most students can picture someone, a friend, a family member, a former member of the congregation, who has drifted. James's closing words press the question: might God be calling you to be the one who goes after this person?

Name the things that hold us back honestly. Often it is fear of awkwardness or rejection, a sense that it is not our place, the assumption that someone else will do it, or simply the discomfort of an emotionally hard conversation. Recognizing these barriers helps us move past them.

Guide toward a humble, loving first step. Reaching out need not begin with confrontation. It can be a simple message of care, a shared meal, an honest expression of having missed them, a willingness to listen to what drove them away. Love and humility open doors that argument slams shut.

Encourage actual action, with realism. Not every outreach will succeed, and we are responsible for the loving attempt, not the outcome, which rests with God and the person's own heart. Invite students to name one person and one concrete, gentle step they could take this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The personal call to pursue a particular wanderer
- Honest naming of what holds us back from reaching out
- A humble, loving first step rather than immediate confrontation
- Responsibility for the loving attempt, with the outcome left to God

Discussion Prompts

- Is there someone who has wandered whom God may be calling you to pursue?
- What has held you back from reaching out?
- What would a humble, loving first step look like this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

James says bringing back a wanderer will “save his soul from death” (5:20). What does it mean that a soul can be saved ‘from death’ here, and what does this reveal about the seriousness of wandering from the truth?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Take James's language seriously: bringing the wanderer back 'will save his soul from death.' This is not merely about improving someone's earthly life or reputation. The death in view is the ultimate, spiritual death, eternal separation from God. James assumes that the unreturned wanderer is genuinely in danger of it.

Draw the implication for the seriousness of wandering. If wandering could not endanger the soul, James's words would be empty. The very promise of saving a soul 'from death' presupposes that a soul among the brothers can be lost. This is sober and clarifying.

Connect this to the worth of the rescue. Because the stakes are eternal, going after a wanderer is among the most significant things a believer can do. To turn a sinner from the error of his way is to participate in the rescue of a soul from eternal death, a work of incalculable value.

Apply it without morbidity. The aim is not to terrify but to awaken love and seriousness. Real stakes call for real love. The seriousness of wandering is precisely why restoration is so glorious; a soul is pulled back from death, and a multitude of sins is covered.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- 'Death' as ultimate spiritual death, eternal separation from God
- The reality that an unreturned wanderer can be lost
- The eternal stakes giving immense worth to the work of restoration
- Seriousness meant to awaken love, not merely fear

Discussion Prompts

- What kind of death is James talking about saving a soul from?
- What does this reveal about how serious wandering from the truth really is?
- How does the eternal stake make the work of restoration so valuable?

Question 6

Student Question:

Many believers carry shame that keeps them from returning to God after a season of wandering, fearing they have gone too far. If you have ever felt that way, or know someone who does, what does the gospel say to the fear that one cannot come home?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question addresses the great obstacle to return: shame. Many who have wandered are not kept away by a love of sin but by the conviction that they have forfeited any right to come back, that they have gone too far, that the door is now closed to them. The gospel speaks directly to this fear.

Point to the heart of God toward the returning. Jesus painted it unforgettably in the father who saw the prodigal 'while he was still a long way off,' ran to him, and threw his arms around him (Luke 15:20). God is not a reluctant, grudging receiver of the returning; He runs to meet them. The shame that says 'you cannot come home' misrepresents His heart.

Address the fear of having gone too far. For the one willing to return in repentance, no wandering is beyond the reach of God's mercy. The blood of Christ cleanses all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). The issue is never whether God will receive the penitent, but whether the wanderer will turn and come.

Encourage the actual step home. If shame is the barrier, the remedy is to believe the gospel's word about the Father's heart and simply to turn back. Invite students who have drifted to come home, and those who know wanderers to assure them that the door is open and the Father is watching the road.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Shame as a primary barrier to returning after wandering
- The Father who runs to meet the returning (Luke 15:20)
- No wandering beyond the reach of God's mercy for the penitent (1 John 1:9)
- Believing the gospel's word about the Father's heart as the path home

Discussion Prompts

- What keeps people from returning to God after a season of wandering?
- What does the parable of the prodigal reveal about God's heart toward the returning?
- What would you say to someone who fears they have gone too far to come home?

Question 7

Student Question:

How does this closing truth about wandering and restoration actually relate to assurance? How can a believer hold both genuine confidence in his salvation and a healthy watchfulness against falling away, without sliding into either presumption or fear?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question draws together the whole study. At first the possibility of falling away might seem to undercut assurance, but rightly understood it does the opposite: it clarifies what true assurance is and is not. Assurance is the confident rest of the faithful, not a guarantee handed to the careless.

Show how confidence and watchfulness belong together. The same Scriptures that assure the faithful believer he is held by God also warn him to remain faithful. These are not in conflict. A child secure in his father's love still takes care not to run into the road. Confidence and watchfulness are two aspects of a healthy walk with God.

Name the two ditches once more. Presumption takes assurance as license, ignoring the warnings and growing careless; it needs the sober word of James. Fear takes the warnings as proof that no one can be sure, and lives in dread; it needs the comforting promises that anchor the faithful. The healthy believer avoids both.

Locate the settled middle. The believer walking with God, however imperfectly, may rest in deep assurance, while keeping a watchful, humble dependence that takes the warnings seriously and keeps pressing on. This is not anxious instability; it is the grounded confidence of a faithful child who intends to keep following his Father all the way home.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The possibility of falling away clarifying rather than undermining true assurance

- Confidence and watchfulness as compatible aspects of a healthy walk
- Presumption and fear as the two ditches to avoid
- Assurance as the confident rest of the faithful, not a guarantee for the careless

Discussion Prompts

- How does the possibility of falling away clarify what true assurance is?
- How can confidence and watchfulness coexist in a healthy way?
- How does a believer avoid both presumption and fear?

Question 8

Student Question:

The whole letter of James ends not with a threat but with a rescue. How does ending on the note of restoration shape the way you understand God's heart, and how might you become someone who helps bring wanderers home rather than merely lamenting their absence?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice where James chooses to end his often bracing letter: not with a final warning but with a rescue, a soul saved from death and a multitude of sins covered. The last note is hope. This shapes how we read the whole sober subject of falling away; the goal is always restoration, not condemnation.

Draw out what this reveals about God's heart. The God who warns is the God who seeks and saves. His warnings are themselves acts of love, meant to keep us from death, and His deepest desire is that the wanderer be brought home. We see His heart not only in the warning but in the rescue with which the letter closes.

Move students from lament to action. It is easy to grieve the empty seats and do nothing. James calls us to become the ones who go after the straying. This means cultivating a congregation, and a personal disposition, oriented toward seeking and restoring rather than merely noticing and mourning.

Encourage a concrete identity shift. Invite students to see themselves as potential rescuers, people who help bring wanderers home. Ask what it would take to become that kind of person and that kind of church, and what one step toward it they could take.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- James ending on rescue and hope rather than threat
- God's warnings as acts of love aimed at keeping us from death
- Moving from lamenting the wanderer to seeking him
- Becoming, personally and as a church, oriented toward restoration

Discussion Prompts

- How does ending on restoration shape your understanding of God's heart?
- How might you move from lamenting the wanderer to seeking him?
- What would it take to become someone who helps bring wanderers home?

Question 9

Student Question:

Scripture warns that a child of God can fall away and must remain faithful, directly answering the teaching of 'once saved, always saved.' Drawing on James 5:19–20 and the wider New Testament, how do we present this truth faithfully, and how does it call the wanderer home rather than drive the faithful to despair?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal heart of the lesson, and indeed a capstone of the whole study, so it deserves the fullest and most careful treatment. The teacher should present this truth clearly and lovingly, marveling at the seriousness and the grace of God together, not merely winning an argument.

State the truth James assumes and the wider New Testament makes explicit. James says one 'among you' can 'wander from the truth,' and that bringing him back saves 'his soul from death.' This presupposes that a believer can fall and be lost. The rest of the New Testament confirms it plainly. Paul warns that those seeking to be justified by law have 'fallen away from grace' (Galatians 5:4). Hebrews warns believers against an 'evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God' (Hebrews 3:12), and speaks soberly of those who, after being enlightened, fall away (Hebrews 6:4–6; 10:26–31). Peter describes those who, having escaped the corruptions of the world through knowing Christ, are again entangled and overcome, for whom 'the last state has become worse for them than the first' (2 Peter 2:20–22). These are warnings to believers, and they are meaningless if a saved person cannot fall.

Now answer 'once saved, always saved' directly but graciously. That teaching holds that a person once truly saved is eternally secure regardless of how he afterward lives. But the warnings above are addressed to genuine believers, and they would be empty threats if falling away were impossible. We must also distinguish our position from the Calvinistic doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, which guarantees that the truly elect cannot finally fall. Scripture presents instead a salvation that is gloriously secure for those who continue in faith, and a real, tragic possibility of falling away for those who abandon it. God will never let go of us against our will; the danger is that we let go of Him.

Hold the warning and the assurance together so neither is lost. This truth is not meant to drive the faithful to despair. The believer walking with God is genuinely secure, kept by God's power through faith (1 Peter 1:5), and may rest in full assurance, as the previous ten lessons have

shown. The warnings are not aimed at robbing the faithful of peace but at keeping the careless from presuming and calling the straying back. Assurance belongs to the faithful; the warning belongs to the wandering; and both come from the same loving God.

Finally, let the truth do its pastoral work, which is to call the wanderer home. The point of teaching that a believer can fall is never to torment sensitive souls who are walking faithfully, but to tell the truth that love requires and to leave the door wide open for return. James ends with rescue, and so should we. The same passage that takes wandering seriously promises that the wanderer can be brought back, his soul saved from death, a multitude of sins covered. This is the truth that answers 'once saved, always saved': not a cold denial of security, but a warmer and truer security, the security of a faithful child who is kept as he keeps following, and who, even if he strays, can always come home.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Scripture's clear teaching that a believer can fall away and be lost (James 5:19–20; Galatians 5:4; Hebrews 3:12; 6:4–6; 10:26–31; 2 Peter 2:20–22)
- The New Testament warnings addressed to genuine believers, and empty if falling away were impossible
- Against 'once saved, always saved' and the Calvinistic perseverance of the saints
- Salvation secure for those who continue in faith; falling away a real possibility for those who abandon it (1 Peter 1:5)
- The warning aimed at the careless and the straying, not at robbing the faithful of peace
- Restoration as the goal: the wanderer can always come home, his soul saved from death

Discussion Prompts

- Which New Testament passages show that a believer can truly fall away, and to whom are they addressed?
- How does our position differ from both 'once saved, always saved' and the Calvinistic guarantee of perseverance?
- How do we hold the warning and the assurance together so the faithful are not driven to despair and the wanderer is called home?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this closing lesson and the whole study on assurance. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses, and the single truth from this study on "How Can I Know?" that you most need to carry forward.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This final capstone gathers not only the lesson but the whole study, and turns it toward lasting formation. Give students generous space to reflect on the journey of all eleven lessons, from 'a Christian can know' to 'the wanderer can come home.'

Listen for where each person has landed. Some have moved from anxiety toward settled assurance; some have been soberly awakened from presumption; some carry a burden for a wanderer they now feel called to seek. Honor wherever the Spirit has brought each one.

Encourage a lasting takeaway. Ask each student to name the single truth from the whole study they most need to carry forward, and one way they will keep returning to it, in Scripture, in prayer, in the fellowship of the church. Assurance is not a one-time lesson but a settled way of walking with God.

Close the study with hope. The aim of all eleven lessons has been that the faithful believer can know he is saved, can rest in God's love without fear, can overcome the world by faith, and can always come home if he strays. Send students out both assured and watchful, confident in the God who keeps them and committed to keep following Him all the way home.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal formation as the goal of the whole study, not merely information
- Honoring the varied places the study has brought different hearts
- A lasting takeaway anchored in ongoing Scripture, prayer, and fellowship
- The settled, watchful confidence of the faithful as the fruit of the whole study

Discussion Prompts

- What is the single truth from this whole study you most need to carry forward?
- How has your assurance changed over the course of these eleven lessons?
- How will you keep returning to that truth in the days ahead?