



**B**EHOLD, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body. <sup>4</sup> Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth. <sup>5</sup> Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! <sup>6</sup> And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell. (James 3:3-6)

I would be very surprised if the reader did not mistake the point of this devotion on *TONGUES OF FIRE* to be an out-of-character defense on my part of the practice of speaking in such a 'babel' that neither the scattered tribes of Babel, over even the speaker himself, could scarcely understand. The tongues to which the Book of Acts and other passages of the New Testament refer are legitimate languages, even those translated directly by Divine Providence into those understood by a diverse group of national representatives. The word 'tongues' is expressed as heteroglossos (Gr: ἑτερόγλωσσος) meaning another language, or a man of other tongues (language – a foreigner).

The tongues of Pentecost were, indeed, a heavenly inspired event since it removed every measure of confusion in the ears of the listener to the Gospel. But the tongues to which I refer today has nothing to do with those divine tongues spoken at Pentecost.

Quite to the contrary, these are the tongues of men and women untampered by the grace and kindness of the Christian faith.

Note that the tongues of Acts appeared as cloven tongues of fire. Those tongues of fire were of divine origin. <sup>Ac 1</sup> *And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.* <sup>2</sup> *And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting.* <sup>3</sup> *And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them.* <sup>4</sup> *And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.* <sup>5</sup> *And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven.* <sup>6</sup> *Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language.* <sup>7</sup> *And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans?* <sup>8</sup> *And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?* (Acts 2:1-8)

I am well aware that there are many devoted Christians who believe that God has given them a gift to speak in such a language that neither they, nor anyone else, comprehends (even God); but I believe these are deceived and I correct them out of love and not malice.

Now, note that the tongues mentioned in the Book of James are of a different nature and origin altogether from the tongues of Pentecost and those spoken of by Paul in 1st Corinthians. These are the tongues of men who speak either out of careless disregard for their neighbors, or deliberately with the intent to destroy or murder.

James is a master illustrator. James gives us a prelude to his later and more detailed description of tongues here in his first chapter: *If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridled not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain.* James 1:26 (KJV) There is perhaps nothing more damning than vain, or false, religion. If we say we have faith to move mountains and yet cause our mouths to become fountains of needless pain and confusion, we are either consciously lying, or else deceived by egregiously false religion.

By the way, even repeating the Lord's Prayer as a matter of habit, and not meaning, is also taking the Lord's Name in vain, is it not? Let us examine the fuller explanation given by James on the matter of tongues:

<sup>1</sup>*My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.* <sup>2</sup> *For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.* <sup>3</sup> *Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body* <sup>4</sup> *Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth.* <sup>5</sup> *Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!* <sup>6</sup> *And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.* <sup>7</sup> *For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed of mankind:* <sup>8</sup> *But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison.* <sup>9</sup> *Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God.* <sup>10</sup> *Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.* <sup>11</sup> *Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?* (James 3:1-11)

The similitudes in which James speaks is refined by the Holy Ghost. He was no learned philosopher or lawyer, yet his word pictures paint stark portraits of truth. *If any*

*man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.* Idle words can lead an army to ruin. *Loose lips sink battleships* was a popular World War II slogan posted in every Naval and Army orderly room. It will be good for us to remember the beginning of knowledge we learned from a kindergarten ballad of our youth: *Be careful little lips what you say.....* How true and how spiritually elementary! When we hear the word 'bridle' mentioned by James, we are reminded of that small device placed as a bit in a horse's mouth to which the bridle is attached to control and animal twenty thousand times its size. *Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body.* In teaching biblical principles, we do not need arcane theological terms to conceal the meaning from lesser initiates. God is a God of simple and direct language.

*Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth.* The helm of a ship is a tiny steering device whose weight and size are of no comparison to that of the ship., In turn, the helm controls the rudder which dictates the direction of the large vessel. The rudder is perhaps less than .00015% the size and weight of the vessel it controls, yet it performs the most important role in the ship's navigation. Compare the tongue to the size of the body – it is very much the same ratio in size and weight as the ship's rudder and the ship, yet the fullness of a man or woman's character is defined by that small organ and the manner in which it is used.

James' crowning similitude comes in the next two verses: *Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth! One little match can burn down thousands of acres of forest which may have grown over a period of a hundred years. This it can do in a couple of days. And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell.* These be strong words of James, but altogether true and not subject to debate! The theme James so skillfully, by the power of the Holy Spirit, embodies in his remarks is one that runs throughout Scripture. God's Word often uses a form of teaching termed 'repetition.' That which is most often repeated is more easily remembered – a famous principle of learning. Below are a few examples throughout Scripture:

### **Old Testament Examples**

*Thou givest thy mouth to evil, and thy tongue frameth deceit. Thou sittest and speakest against thy brother; thou slanderest thine own mother's son.* (Psalm 50:19-20)

*'You shall not go about as a talebearer among your people; nor shall you take a stand against the life of your neighbor: I am the LORD.* (Leviticus 19:16)

*He who goes about as a talebearer reveals secrets; Therefore do not associate with one who flatters with his lips.* (Proverbs 2:19)

### **New Testament Examples**

*Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice.* (Ephesian 4:31)

*Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work, 2- to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing all humility to all men.* (Titus 3:1-2), plus those of James.

Dear Reader, how have you used your mouth today – in spreading the Gospel, or some other?