

# *Tongues on Fire*

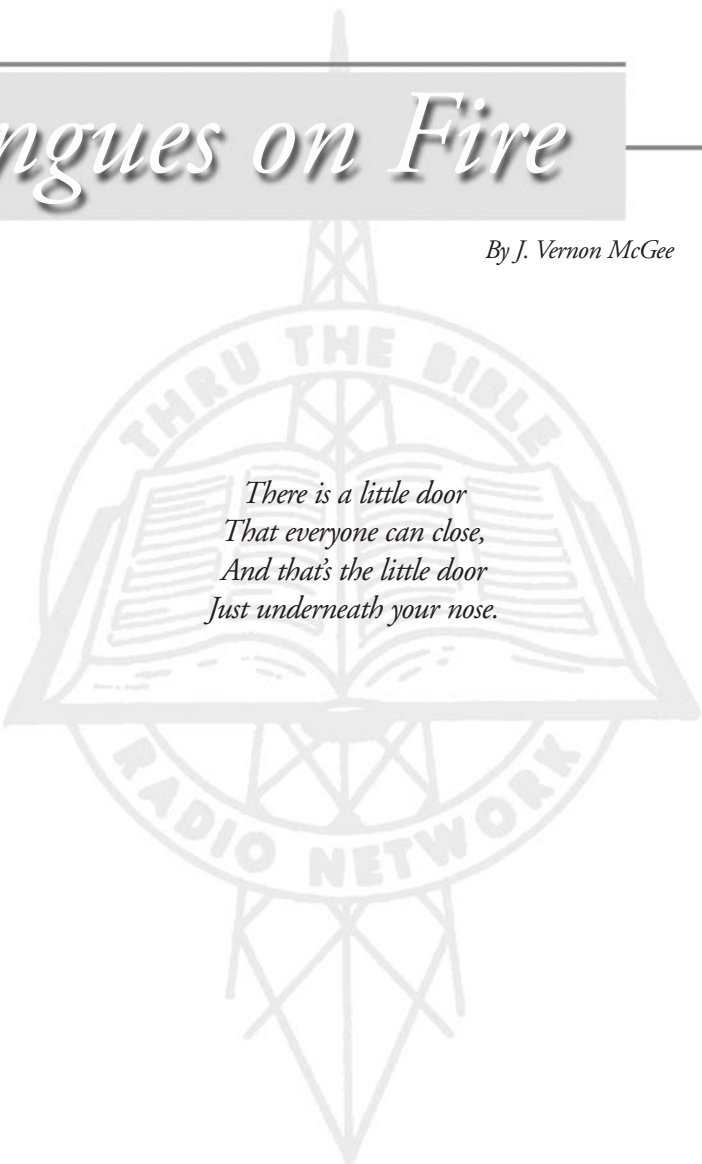
*By J. Vernon McGee*



Thru the Bible Radio Network  
Pasadena, California 91109-7100

# Tongues on Fire

By J. Vernon McGee



*There is a little door  
That everyone can close,  
And that's the little door  
Just underneath your nose.*

Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture references are  
from the *New Scofield Reference Bible*.

Printed in the United States of America  
1986, Revised 2005

---

# Tongues on Fire

Proper warning must be given to those who are gossips: This study may bring a measure of discomfort of mind and heart. However, a little Christian courage will be helpful in looking frankly at this subject given to us by James—namely, hell on fire.

*If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain.* (James 1:26)

## The Explosive Epistle of James

James is the most explosive epistle in the New Testament. In fact, it is the spiritual atomic bomb of the Bible. It is a book that is feared by both saint and sinner. The policy, I think, of the average Christian is “hands off,” “handle with care,” “let this alone,” or “do not open” (it is not “do not open ‘til Christmas,” but *do not open at all*).

In preparing to teach on this epistle, I went back to make an inventory of my own ministry, and it was rather humiliating. When I go to conferences I speak on Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, Romans, Galatians, Acts, and all of the Gospels. I take the Book of Ruth in the Old Testament a great deal because I love it, also the Minor Prophets and the Book of Psalms. But I have never spoken on the Epistle of James at a conference. So I come in under the category of those who may be a little afraid to open this book.

---

You see, we dismiss the Epistle of James as being unimportant. John is the Gospel of love, and it appeals to our hearts. Romans and Galatians, intellectual documents, present the great doctrines of the faith, and that appeals to our heads. Ephesians and Colossians go to the heights with spiritual truth, and we like that. And the Epistle to the Hebrews goes down deeper than any other in the New Testament, or the Old Testament for that matter, and that is why we latch on to that.

But James, well, it is unappealing. It contains Christian clichés, sententious sayings and sentences, pious proverbs. It contains that which looks to be obvious, and then it pinches just a little. Even Martin Luther said of this epistle that it was “strawy,” meaning that it did not contain great doctrines that had transformed his life. Therefore he gave very little attention to the Epistle of James.

## **Written By a Half Brother of Jesus**

We might expect that James was written by one of the “sons of thunder” (Mark 3:17), perhaps by James the brother of John. But it was not; it was written by James who was the half brother of our Lord. You see, Mary had other children. We are told in Matthew that the question was asked of our Lord,

*Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And his brethren, James, and Joseph, and Simon, and Judas? And his sisters, are they not all with us?*  
(Matthew 13:55, 56)

Mary had four other sons, and the one who was probably next to our Lord in age was James. It is that James who wrote this epistle.

---

The Epistle of James is a lesson in humility. If the Lord Jesus had been your half brother, could you have written four or five chapters and not have mentioned that fact? I am confident that if I had been the Lord's half brother, somewhere in this epistle I would have let the reader know it in some casual or humble way. However, James did not do that. Instead, he called himself "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (James 1:1). James would have said with Paul, "I know Him no longer after the flesh—He is my Lord and my Savior" (see 2 Corinthians 5:16).

James was also the head of the church in Jerusalem. Acts 15 records the great council that was held at Jerusalem. After Paul and Barnabas, many of the converted Pharisees, and Peter had spoken, then James drew it all to a conclusion and formulated the opinion of the group—the Holy Spirit's opinion, if you please.

James was also a great man of prayer. In fact, he was called "old camel knees" because he spent so much time on his knees praying that they became stiff and calloused. That is the James who wrote this epistle.

## **James, First Book of the New Testament**

Another arresting thing about James is that he was the one who wrote the first book in the New Testament. If we had the books of the New Testament arranged chronologically, James would come where Matthew is; he wrote first. I remember hearing a young preacher of liberal leanings say that James wrote his epistle in order to answer Paul in his arguments in Romans and Galatians. The trouble with that statement is that when James wrote, no one else had yet written! He was not answering anybody; nobody had yet put down a pen for the New Testament.

---

Moreover, I have come to the conclusion that James had the same theme in his epistle that Paul did: Justification by faith! “But,” somebody says, “he said it’s justification by works.” I know he did. You see, when James wrote, he was saying simply this: Men are justified by works—not the works of the Law, but the works of faith. He wrote from man’s viewpoint. When God sees us, He sees our hearts and knows whether we have saving faith. But when men see us, they don’t see our hearts, they see the works of faith. James said if the work of faith is not there, brother, you are not saved. Paul would agree with him, for Paul said practically the same thing. Therefore, they have the same theme.

James pours in the acid of reality on the coin of faith to test it, to see if it is genuine. That is the reason he is not popular. You see, we like to read the Epistle of 1 John because in it we get the assurance of our salvation. I, frankly, think we have it reversed. I think that we ought to read the Epistle of James first to see if our faith is genuine, then read 1 John to gain assurance of salvation. James was written first because I think the Spirit of God intended that we read it first.

## **The Acid Test**

Let us go into the laboratory of life, reach up on the shelf, and take down a bottle of acid to test our faith today. We ought to test it! If you had property in the desert and on it you’d found some very shiny, heavy-looking stuff, and you said, “My, this is more than a rock—this must be ore,” what would you do? You would rush back into town to the assayer’s office and say, “Test this and see if it’s genuine.” If you had some property and

---

thought you had oil on it, you'd ask an oil geologist to come out and make an inspection and run some tests. If you had a spring on your property, you'd take in a sample and have it tested to see if it was fit to drink. Since our faith is so important, don't you think we ought to test it to see whether it's genuine or not?

There are several bottles on the shelf, but I want to take down a certain bottle of acid, and the label on it is "Tongue." That is acid, you know. If you put a blue litmus paper in your mouth, it will turn red because your tongue is acid. This acid is stronger than hydrochloric or sulfuric acid. Oh, it is potent! So I advise you to handle it with care, because you can get hurt with it. It could explode! But let's take down the acid labeled "Tongue" and pour a little of it on our tongues and see whether our faith is genuine or not.

Now, I am not interested in the *chemistry* of the tongue. I am interested in the *theology* of the tongue. Notice this:

*If any man among you seem to be religious...* (James 1:26)

The word "religious" (Greek *thrēskos*, the only place it is used in the New Testament) used here actually has to do with going through a ritual, a form, or a ceremony. He is talking here about going through a religious service. If he "seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart [he may be sincere, but he is deceiving his own heart], this man's religion is vain [that is, it's empty]." Our formality of going through a ritual isn't worth anything if our tongue is not under control.

That is acid, isn't it?

---

The tongue is what lifts man above the animal world. Man is not a gibbering ape nor an aping parrot. Man is not an inarticulate animal, and he is not a mockingbird. Man can put thoughts into words, express himself, and be understood. It is by the tongue that we communicate on the highest level.

It is said that the average articulate person utters 30,000 words every day. Now, that is a fair sized volume, and in the course of a lifetime you and I could fill a library. How would you like to read it? I think you and I are going to hear it in eternity. I think that is one of the things the Lord Jesus is going to force us to do at His judgment seat, for I think He has recorded everything you and I have ever said. That is going to hurt, is it not, if we are going to have to sit with Him and listen to the words that we have uttered?

## **Our Tongues Give Us Away**

The tongue identifies us. It is the index of our life, the table of contents, the fraternity pin of our character, and it gives us away—our tongues betray us.

Several years ago my family and I were traveling from Salt Lake City, Utah, to Mount Hermon in California. After coming over Donner Pass, we arrived at a little town on the highway and drove into a filling station. I stepped out of the car, turned to the fine looking man there, and said, “Fill ‘er up.” That’s all I said. Then I began to look at the grand scenery that is around there, and while I was looking, I felt this boy eyeing me very closely.

In a moment he said, “Are you Dr. McGee?”

I said, “Yes, sir, I am. But do you know me?”



---

He said, “No, I don’t.”

“Well,” I said, “do I know you?”

He said, “No.”

Puzzled, I asked, “How did you recognize me?”

He said, “On Sunday nights in the wintertime we can get your radio program, and we all listen to you. I think I’d have known you anywhere!”

My voice betrays me; it gives me away. All I said was, “Fill ‘er up!”—three words. You may remember that this is the thing the little maid said to Simon Peter: “Thy speech betrayeth thee” (Matthew 26:73)—it tells who you are.

Your tongue tells where you came from. It tells whether you are ignorant or educated, cultured or crude, clean or unclean, vulgar or refined, guilty or not guilty. It tells whether you are a believer or a blasphemer, and it tells whether you are a Christian or a non-Christian. Your tongue gives you away.

If a tape recorder recorded everything that you said this past week, and if it was played back before an audience, they would know whether you are a Christian or not. Your tongue tells who you are.

## The Unbridled Tongue

Let us continue to pour some of the acid on our tongues. First of all, James deals with the unbridled and unrestrained tongue:

*Behold, we put bits in the horses’ mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body.* (James 3:3)

---

And the Psalmist said,

*Be ye not like the horse, or like the mule, that have no understanding, whose mouth must be held in with bit and bridle, lest they come near unto thee.* (Psalm 32:9)

David also wrote in the Psalms:

*I said, I will take heed to my ways, that I sin not with my tongue; I will keep my mouth with a bridle, while the wicked is before me.* (Psalm 39:1)

In other words, because he wanted to give the right kind of testimony, David said he would put a bridle on his mouth. David was so afraid he would say something that would hurt his God that he prayed, “Set a watch, O LORD, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips” (Psalm 141:3).

Somebody has said that it takes a baby two years to learn to talk and fifty years to learn to keep his mouth shut. There was a fellow fishing down on the pier, and a dear little lady came up to him and began scolding him. She said, “Aren’t you ashamed of yourself to cruelly catch a poor little fish like that?” This fellow didn’t even look up. He said, “Lady, maybe you are right, but if this fish had kept its mouth shut, it would not have been caught.”

The tongue is like a runaway horse. James said that the bits of a bridle that are put into the mouth of a horse are very small, but they will hold a horse in check and keep him from running away. Some of us may still have a faint recollection of the horse and buggy days, and we have probably seen a horse run away, bringing death and destruction. Someone has said that the mind

---

starts the tongue to wagging and then sometimes goes off and leaves it. The tongue is like a runaway horse, and only the Spirit of God can control it.

Our Lord said:

*...Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.... Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account of it in the day of judgment.*

(Matthew 12:34, 36)

And we read:

*Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.* (Proverbs 4:23)

God is listening to you, and He is listening to me. He heard that whispered conspiracy. He heard that word of slander. He heard that falsehood, that cutting remark. He heard every obscene utterance that you have ever given as well as that foul blasphemy. He heard you. And that told who you were. "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh." It tells who you are.

James then changes his figure of speech from a horse to a ship:

*Behold also the ships, which, though they are so great and are driven by fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm [rudder], wherever the pilot willeth.*

(James 3:4)

A fierce storm will drive a ship, but a little rudder can control it. The tongue is a little rudder. It can change the course of our lives. Men have had their reputations ruined because someone said something he should not have said. The fair name of many a

---

woman has been wrecked, ruined, and smeared because some gossip said a thoughtless, untrue thing. This little tongue is worse than a storm at sea, and it can do more damage. The tongue is more dangerous than a runaway horse or a hurricane.

The Holy Spirit is the bridle for the tongue, and as we shall see, the Holy Spirit alone can control the tongue of man.

I personally believe that alcohol will be the instrument that will eventually destroy America. It is right now eating at the vitals of our land. We are becoming a nation of drunks and of drunken sots. The number of alcoholics in this country is skyrocketing, and it is a most alarming thing. But, while the Word of God condemns alcohol, for every verse that you will show me in the Word of God where alcohol is condemned, I'll show you a hundred verses where the misuse of the tongue is condemned. I believe that the tongue is doing more damage in this world and hurting mankind more than anything else. It is far more dangerous than the atomic bomb, and as the writer of Ecclesiastes said, "Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin..." (Ecclesiastes 5:6).

Paul speaks of the fact that one of the marks of sinners is that "with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips" (Romans 3:13). Have you ever been to the snake pit at the zoo and looked in at those hissing serpents that are carrying enough poison to kill an army? May I say kindly to you that we can look into a mirror and stick out our tongues, and we'll see something far more dangerous than any fang that any serpent ever had. For a serpent can kill only the body; you and I have a tongue that can destroy personality and wreck lives.

---

God says He hates it:

*These six things doth the LORD hate; yea, seven are an abomination unto him: a proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood.* (Proverbs 6:16, 17)

He puts His hatred for a lying tongue ahead of murder! The tongue can be absolutely unbridled; and when it is, the heart is not Christian or controlled by a Christian. An unbridled tongue is evidence of an unsaved person.

## The Uncontrolled Tongue

Let's pour out a little more acid now, for next James addresses the uncontrolled tongue:

*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 is set on fire of hell.* (James 3:6)

Fire, I suppose, is one of the greatest friends that man has. A great many historians write that the dawn of civilization came when man discovered fire. When it is under control, it warms our bodies, cooks our food, and heats our homes. But when the house is on fire, it is tragic. When fire is under control, it generates power to put in motion the wheels of industry that brings work to multitudes. But when in the night we hear a siren announcing through dense darkness the fact that a great blaze is consuming the factory, then fire is a tragedy.

James said that the tongue is like a fire, and it can be a cure or a curse. When it is under control, it is a blessing; when it is out of control, it is a blight. Again the writer of the Proverbs says:

---

*There is he that speaketh like the piercings of a sword, but the tongue of the wise is health.* (Proverbs 12:18)

He also adds:

*The heart of him that hath understanding seeketh knowledge, but the mouth of fools feedeth on foolishness.*  
(Proverbs 15:14)

It can be a blessing or a blight. There is an old Arabian proverb that goes, “Thou art master of the unspoken word; the spoken word is master of thee.” Up to the time the tongue has said it, you have control; but the minute you have said it, it goes like a fire—you no longer can control it. It is like a forest fire that burns over hills and mountains.

The tongue can be set on fire by either heaven or hell. On the Day of Pentecost there were “tongues as of fire” (Acts 2:3), and there stood up a man whose tongue was then under perfect control. He was someone who had blundered with his tongue, who had always said the wrong thing. Then, with his tongue under the control of the Holy Spirit, Simon Peter gave the first sermon on the Day of Pentecost, and thousands came to Christ. *A tongue under control!*

For many years I pastored a church, and I saw the forest fire of the tongue burn through. Wonderful improvements were made in many spheres, but I must confess that no improvement was made in this respect—the fire still burned. We had many remarkable conversions over the years, but I can cite three couples whose faith was almost wrecked by listening to the tongues of gossips. One of these young couples came to me and said, “Our feet well nigh slipped, and we were ready to give it all up. But then we found out we were listening to the wrong person.”

---

Let me warn you: This little tongue that you and I have gives us away—it tells whether we are genuine or not. And it is dangerous; the little tongue is the most dangerous thing there is.

## The Untamed Tongue

We have come in our testing to the third and final matter. We have a bit of acid left, so let us pour it on and look now at the untamed tongue.

*For every kind of beasts, and of birds, and of serpents, and of things in the sea, is tamed, and hath been tamed by mankind.* (James 3:7)

When I was pastor of a church in Nashville, Tennessee, I had a deacon there who shared a common enjoyment of going down and watching the circus unload. We went down one morning at about two o'clock and watched it come in, and then we followed it out to the circus grounds and watched them put up the tents. One of the animal trainers came into the tent where we were watching some beautiful little lion cubs playing. He went to their cage, put his hand in, and wrestled with them roughly, rolling them over onto their backs. My deacon was a salesman who had never met a stranger, and he went right up to this man and asked, "Why did you do that?" He answered, "These lion cubs will go into the cage with me before too long. I will never pass them without playing with them, because when I go into the cage, I want them under perfect control."

Men can train lions. One can put up a flaming hoop, command the lion to jump through, and these great snarling lions with

---

shaggy manes jump through the hoop. Men can train little fleas and big elephants. But, friend, you never yet have seen a tongue on display in a zoo—no one has been able to capture one yet. The circus has never been able to make one of them perform, for you can never depend upon a tongue.

## God Alone Can Tame It

*But the tongue can no man tame; it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men....* (James 3:8, 9)

That is interesting and very suggestive. No man can tame it—only God can tame the tongue. A regenerate tongue in a redeemed body is the way God does it.

It is remarkable to note that it is with the tongue that one becomes a child of God:

*That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.* (Romans 10:9, 10)

What Paul is saying is that the mouth and the heart have to be brought into harmony. They have to say the same thing, because your mouth is going to tell who you are in your heart. When our Lord came to the dumb man, the writer of the Gospel is very careful to say, “He touched his mouth!” (See Mark 7:33.) If He has touched you, He has touched your mouth also.



---

Mark also tells us that when they went out, our Lord gave the commission, saying, “They shall speak with new tongues” (Mark 16:17)—and that does not mean “unknown tongues.” Rather, it means that you will talk with a regenerated tongue—by your tongue, you will say who you are. And, thank God, He will ultimately bring the tongue into captivity. For there is coming a day when the tongue will be brought into obedience to God: Scripture says that “every knee should bow...and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Philippians 2:10, 11). The tongue will someday be brought under control.

Now the question arises: Can you tell a Christian by the tongue? James said that you can.

*Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, who are made after the similitude [likeness] of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be. Doth a ountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter?* (James 3:9-11)

Do you believe that a fountain can send forth both bitter water and sweet water? If it does, there is something wrong with the fountain.

Our tongues do tell who we are. You may go to a consecration service on Sunday evening and sweetly get up and give a verse of Scripture. But then if you go out and indulge in filthy and suggestive language, James says you are not a Christian, and I do not care what you may say to the contrary. If a man seems to be religious and that little tongue is saying things it should not say, James says that man’s religion, even his profession, is empty.

---

You give yourself away by your tongue—it tells whether you are His or not. And when He regenerates you, He doesn't regenerate everything *except* the tongue—the tongue is the most important thing! “If we confess with our mouth” doesn't mean just on Sunday; it means Monday morning in the workplace. It means that in everything we say during the week we are confessing the Lord Jesus with our mouths!

This bitter acid hurts, doesn't it? But it tells whether we are real or not.

---

## Proverbs Ancient and Modern

*Anyone who thinks by the inch and talks by the yard ought to be moved by the foot.*

*I always watch the words I say,  
To keep them soft and sweet,  
For I don't know from day to day,  
Which ones I'll have to eat.*

*Speak as if Jesus was hearing you. He is.*

*It is well to remember that mansions in the sky cannot be built out of the mud thrown at others.*

*People with sharp tongues often end up cutting their own throats.*

*God in His wisdom has made the mouth to close and the ear to remain open.*

---

*“The boneless tongue, so small and weak  
Can crush and kill,” declares the Greek.  
“The tongue destroys a greater hoard,”  
Asserts the Turk, “than does the sword.”*

*A Persian proverb wisely saith,  
“A lengthy tongue—an early death”—  
Or, sometimes takes this form instead,  
“Don’t let your tongue cut off your head.”*

*“A tongue can speak a word whose speed,”  
The Chinese say, “outstrips the steed,”  
While Arab sages this impart:  
“The tongue’s great storehouse is the heart.”*

*From Hebrew with this maxim sprung,  
“Tho’ feet should slip, ne’er let the tongue.”  
The sacred writer crowns the whole:  
“Who keeps his tongue doth keep his soul.*