

James 5:1-20

5:1 Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you.

God does not oppose people simply because they are wealthy, but is opposed to the rich whose deplorable character oppresses and takes advantage of others (cf. Prov. 30:7-9; I Tim. 6:9-10, 17).

It is doubtful that these are believers for they are contrasted to the "brethren" in verse 7. It is also unlikely that those addressed in verses 1-6 would every read James' letter. It is more probable that James is using a rhetorical device known as apostrophe. This is when a writer addresses an imaginary person in order to make an exclamation or pronouncement about something. James is addressing a group outside of his Christian audience either to dissuade his readers from envying the wealthy or be attracted to their lifestyle, or to remind them that the actions of the rich have not escaped the notice of God.

Those who take advantage of others are usually oblivious to the fact that their deeds are being recorded by God and they will be held accountable for their actions. They fail to see that their "court date" draws nearer each day. The wealthy are to weep and howl for the miseries which are coming upon them. "Weep and howl" is not the same as "be miserable and mourn and weep" in 4:9. In 4:9 it is a call to repentance but here it is an expression of anguish by those who realize that their actions and attitudes will be judged and that time to change has run out.

The description of the judgment follows.

5:2 Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten.

5:3 Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure!

The impact of the coming judgment first affects their wealth. James places riches into three categories; things that can rot, things that can be eaten by insects, and things that corrode.

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Wealth in ancient times could be measured by the amount of grain one possessed (Lk. 12:16-20). It could also be identified by the types of garments worn. Those who had wealth often wore richly decorated robes (Jdg. 14:12; II Ki. 5:5; Job 13:28; Matt. 6:19; Acts 20:33). Possessing gold and silver is still a sign of wealth.

Yet none of these things last. Grain is susceptible to rot, mold, or rodent damage. Clothing could be eaten by moths or deteriorate through use. Even precious metals will not last.

The fact that gold and silver do not rust have caused some to accuse James of being inaccurate or ignorant. However, the word translated as "rust" can also mean "corrode" or "tarnish" (Burdick, EBC, 199). Therefore, James could simply be saying that "the tarnish was indication of how long the hoarded wealth had lain idle" (Burdick, EBC, 199). However, it is also possible that rust is being used metaphorically of the corruptible nature of wealth. "In the ruin of their property, their own ruin is portrayed" (A. Plummer).

The rust will used against the wealthy when they stand before the Judge for "it witnessed to the greed and selfishness of these wicked men, who had far more than they could ever use, while their workers were deprived of their wages" (Burdick, EBC, 199-200).

Their foolishness in accumulating wealth is seen in that they are in the last days and judgment is impending. They should have been laying up treasure in heaven (Matt. 6:19-21) for the judge is at the door (5:9).

In the end their stockpile of deteriorating goods will be used against them in the judgment as evidence of their greed. The corrosion will consume their flesh like fire (i.e. their greed will result in their own destruction).

5:4 Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.

5:5 You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.

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5:6 You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you.

James now describes the guilt of the rich in concrete terms. They have oppressed those who work for them. They have lived in luxury. They have put to death the righteous.

Laborers in NT times were people who made minimum wages. Their daily earnings were just enough to meet their daily needs (Matt. 9:27; 20:1-10). In this case they were people who "mowed the fields." To mow the fields refers to cutting the fields of barley and wheat at harvest time. Normally, at the end of each day the laborers were paid for their work, but in the case presented monies were being fraudulently withheld.

The crime of withholding the laborers' pay is intensified in a number ways:

(1) First, James says that the land owners had "fields" hinting that they possessed extensive lands.

(2) Secondly, since it was harvest season money from the produce that was sold was available, making withholding pay that much more evil. There could be no excuse of having cash flow problems.

(3) Thirdly, the rich were living in luxury while the poor that were working for them suffered. Those who live in luxury are like the man in Luke 16:19 who "habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, gaily living in splendor every day."

(4) They also led a life of wanton pleasure. This amplifies the wastefulness of their living. The prodigal son in Luke 15:13 squandered his possessions with frivolous living.

(5) Lastly, the rich were aggressors and accused the righteous to have them executed while those murdered remained passive (Matt. 5:39; Ro. 12:19; & of Christ - I Pet. 2:21-23; Isa. 53:7).

Withholding pay was forbidden in the Law of Moses (Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:14-15). Paul tells us that a laborer is worthy of his wages (I Tim. 5:18) and even an ox was not to be muzzled while working (Deut. 25:4). But injustices are common among worldly-minded men both then (Jer. 22:13; Mal. 3:5) and now. These workers were given less consideration than even an ox.

Both the unpaid wages and the workers cry out to Lord Sabaoth for justice and vengeance.

"Sabaoth" (not Sabbath) is a transliteration of the Hebrew meaning "hosts." The Lord of Hosts comes from Isaiah 1:9 and is one of the most majestic titles for God. He is the Creator and Ruler of all and is the Commander of the heavenly hosts. It stresses that God is the all-powerful one. The Lord Sabaoth hears the cries of His people (Exo. 2:24; 6:5).

Though the rich saw themselves as shrewd businessmen, they were only fattening their hearts for the slaughter. The heart is the seat of emotion, the inner life that affects the desires of a person. This person has fully indulged in the all that he desired. Like a senseless ox that gorges itself before the slaughter, the rich were unwittingly preparing themselves for judgment (compare Isa. 34:6; Jer. 15:3). The more they hoarded, the more guilt would be accredited to them. Their increased evil was only piling up judgment for themselves (Jer. 12:2; 46:21).

In verses 1-6 the Day of Judgment has been mentioned a number of times. This is most likely a reference to the judgment that will occur at the return of Christ (Rev. 19:17-18; Matt. 13:46; 25:31 ff.) for the last days refers to the time period just prior to His return (II Pet. 3:3; I Jn. 2:18).

the proper reaction of those who experience injustices

Following the denunciation of the unrighteous rich, James turns to the oppressed believers who suffer at their hands. James encourages the believer in three areas: (1) they should be patient considering the nearness of the Lord's return (vv. 7-8), (2) they should not blame others for their circumstances (v.9), and (3) they should follow the examples of godly people in the past (10-11).

5:7a Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord.

In verses 7-8 the word patience is used. Earlier (1:3-4, 12, but also in 5:11) James encouraged endurance. Yet the Greek words in chapters 1 and 5

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differ in meaning. In chapter 1, "endurance" has the idea of being under a heavy load and determining to stay there instead of trying to escape (Hiebert 75) while the Greek word for patience in 5:7 and 8 means to be "long-tempered" as opposed to being "short-tempered". In other words, it is not a passive action but an active self-restraint that does not retaliate when wronged (Prov. 14:29; 15:18; 19:11). Patience is an attribute of God Himself (Ro. 2:4; 9:22; I Pet. 2:20) expressed by His restraint in not immediately judging sinful men (Psa. 86:15; 103:8; Jer. 15:15). It is the opposite of quick-tempered flare ups. It endures difficult people.

Such patience will be needed until Christ returns, for when He returns He will rule with justice and relieve them of their oppression (Isa. 42:3-4; Isa 35).

"The coming of the Lord" is one of the most frequently used expressions for Christ's return (see Hiebert, 296 for a list of verses). The verb includes His arrival (cf. II Cor. 7:6 "the *coming* of Titus") but focuses attention on the presence of Christ among His people (cf. Phil. 2:12 "not only in my *presence*").

Next James encourages patience through the analogy of the farmer.

5:7b Behold, the farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains.

No farmer sows seed expecting to reap a harvest the next day. Rather, he patiently waits for the early and late rains. (The early rains begin at the end of November or early October and soften the soil for sowing and start the germination of the seed. Heavier rains fall from December through February which help establish the plants. The later rains then come in the spring [April and May] and cause rapid growth of the plants.)

His patience stems from the fact that he saw the produce as "precious." Its arrival was anticipated with joy and expectation. It was worth the wait.

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5:8 You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.

Just like the farmer, the oppressed Christian also needs to be patient, waiting for God to complete His work in them before Christ returns.

They also need to strengthen you hearts. To strengthen something is to support it so that it is able to withstand whatever is put upon it. The rich had fattened their hearts by indulging in sensual pleasures, the believer needs to shore up his inner life so that he is stable amidst trials. Elsewhere this is said to be the work of God in the believer (I Thess. 3:13; II Thess. 2:16-17; I Pet. 5:10). In Luke 22:32 we are called upon to strengthen each other. Here it is our personal responsibility. All three are true.

The reason to be steadfast is because Christ's return is imminent. Jesus taught His disciples to expect His return at any time (Matt. 25; Mk. 13:32-37) but did not promise when it would be (Matt. 24:36, 44, 50; 25:4, 13, etc.). James, like the other NT writers believed this (Phil. 4:5; I Pet. 4:7; I Jn. 2:18).

Had the rich believed that the Judge was near their attitude toward their wealth would have changed. How much more should the hope of His return transform our lives, attitudes, and give us the patience to endure the trials of life (I Thess. 4:18; I Pet. 4:7; II Pet. 3:11; I Jn. 3:3)!

5:9 Do not complain, brethren, against one another, that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door.

"Complain" is sometimes translated as "sigh" or "groan" (cf. Mk. 7:34; Ro. 8:23) but refers to faultfinding and being dissatisfied with others. The Israelites were infamous for their murmuring against God and each other and were regularly condemned by God for it (see my notes on "The Grumbling of God's People").

Stress also often spills into other areas of life. Although James can empathize with the peoples' troubles he doesn't empathize with their carnal

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responses to life. Critical feelings, judging, or lashing out at one another has no excuse.

If Christ were literally standing at the door of our house and we knew He was there with the intent of entering and judging us based on what we were saying at that moment there is no question that we would control our speech. Knowing that every condemning word we speak results in reciprocal condemnation (Matt. 7:1-2; 12:36), and that the Judge (Christ) is ready to pronounce His judgment on us should motivate us to stop speaking against others.

5:10 As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

5:11 Behold, we count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful.

James next turns his brethren to Old Testament examples of people who endured suffering with patience.

Although the prophets were sent by God to speak to His people they suffered great persecution. 2 Chronicles 36:16 says that the people of Israel "continually mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, until there was no remedy." Reference to this persecution is very frequent in the NT (Matt. 5:12; 21:35-36; 22:6; 23:29-37; Lk. 13:33; Acts 7:51-52; Ro. 11:3; I Thess. 2:15; Heb. 11:32-38; Rev. 16:6; 18:24). Jesus also suffered (I Pet. 2:21-24) and predicted the suffering of His followers (Matt. 5:12 cf. Acts 5:41).

We admire the prophets for their godliness and commitment to God and desire to imitate their character. "We count those blessed who endured." To be placed in alongside of them is a great honor and should motivate us to persevere.

Job above all the OT examples is a picture of endurance. Job was visited with unbelievable calamity. In a single day his oxen, donkeys, and camels, were taken and all of his servants and children killed. Even so Job

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could say, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD." (Job 1:21). Later he was smitten with "sore boils from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head" (2:7), was encouraged by his wife to curse God and die (2:9), and was accused by his "friends" of unrighteousness. Job protested to God but he never abandoned his belief and was a tremendous example of suffering under trials nevertheless.

James concludes by saying that we have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful. The outcome of the Lord's dealings with Job showed that He is full of compassion and is merciful. Through his suffering Job saw the infinite majesty and excellence of God (Job 42:5-6), had his fortunes restored, and was allowed to father more children, having confidence that in eternity he would be reunited with those he lost. Job deserved nothing, but the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful.

TRUE FAITH IS SEEN IN TRUTHFULNESS

5:12 But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but let your yes be yes, and your no, no; so that you may not fall under judgment.

It is difficult to know how verse 12 ties into the previous discussion, however, James begins the verse with the word "but" which shows that he had a connection in mind.

James' words remind us of Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:34-37. There Jesus said, "But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; and anything beyond these is of evil."

An oath is an appeal made to God in public, calling upon Him to witness a statement made in connection with an event or fact.

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Both the OT and NT permitted oaths to be taken in God's name (Deut. 10:20; Ro. 1:9; II Cor. 1:23; I Thess. 2:5, 10). Oaths were taken to encourage truthfulness. Oaths made promises more solemn for a false or irreverent oath profaned the name of God. Once God's name was attached to the vow it became a debt that had to be paid to the Lord (Carson, 153). However, taking oaths had degenerated into a *means* of promoting deceit. For example, one Rabbi said that if you swear toward Jerusalem you are bound to your vow, but if you swear by Jerusalem you are not. Other Rabbis felt there was no binding authority to an oath unless some form of the name of God was contained in it. Thus the Jews felt that they could swear by the temple, the law, the altar etc. and yet be under no obligation to keep their promises (Matt. 23:16-22). This practice is the worst form of ungodliness. It is using a pious guise to be deceitful.

In Matthew 5 Jesus shows how taking oaths in this way is foolish. Swearing by heaven, earth, or Jerusalem was in essence swearing by God. Those things and God could not be separated. Heaven was His throne (Isa. 66:1) and the earth was His footstool. Likewise, Jerusalem was well known as the city of God (Ps. 48:1-3; Zech. 8:3). Taking it a step further, it wouldn't even be safe to swear by the hairs of one's own head since they too belong to God. Even hair color is under God's control. In other words, everything that exists is ultimately God's (Ps. 89:11), so to swear by any oath is to swear by Him. Therefore no oath should be broken. In fact, it's better not to swear at all. If men were truthful there is no need for oaths.

The real intent of both Jesus' and James' teaching is truthfulness. Those who follow Christ should view all of life as holy unto Him (Ro. 14:6-8; Zech. 14:20, 21; I Cor. 10:31; Col. 3:17).

TRUE FAITH IS SEEN IN ITS DEPENDENCE UPON PRAYER

Verses 13-18 mention the need of prayer 7 times and stress the need for a vital connection to God in every circumstance of life. Prayer is necessary in everything. If someone suffers, they should pray. If they are cheerful, they should pray. But especially if they are sick, they should resort to prayer.

Times for Prayer

5:13 Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praises.

"Suffering" refers to hardship, misfortune, or calamity. It may be physical, emotional, or spiritual in nature. Many who suffer resort to self-pity, complaining, and negativism. James says to resort to prayer. This is the same council James gave at the beginning of the epistle.

"Let him pray" is singular and is the response of each of us individually to our own situation.

But we should also pray in times of joy as well. In this case its proper to pray through songs of praise.

5:14 Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord;

5:15 and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him.

James now turns his attention to those who are sick. "Sick" is not limited to physical ailments, but includes mental, moral, or spiritual weaknesses. "Sickness often awakens a consciousness of sin to the sufferer" (Hiebert, 318).

Several details should be noted.

1) The *sick person* is to take the initiative in asking the elders to come, others shouldn't ask for him.

2) The *church leaders* are to be called, not those who have special gifts of healing. Those who lead the church are to exercise spiritual oversight and are the logical ones to call in such situations.

3) In addition to praying for the individual, the elders are to anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord (cf. Mk. 6:13). James did not view the oil as the source of the healing (i.e. it was not medicinal in this case) for he says it is *the prayer offered in faith* that restores the one who is sick. The oil is

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most likely symbolic of the Holy Spirit who lives in and watches over the believer.

4) The verses do not specify the content of prayer that is offered. It might be a prayer for deliverance but it is also appropriate to pray for strength to endure.

5) The promise given is that the prayer of faith will restore the one who is sick (Ja. 5:15).

The question arises with regard to those who have been prayed for and yet die. It should be remembered that James' prayer is no more bold than Jesus' prayer when He said, "And *whatever* things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive" (Matt. 21:22). The key is in understanding the implications of "believing" and "faith." Our believing must be based on all that God has said in His Word and recognize that all prayer is subject to His will (I Jn. 5:14). A Christian should not make demands upon God's will. God may choose to heal someone based on prayer alone, or due to the prayer and anointing, or due to His guidance of medical professionals. In any case our prayer of faith must accept any answer God desires to give as well as the means He desires to give it.

The thought is then added, "The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven" (Ja. 5:15b). To "save" the one who is sick refers to physical healing not spiritual salvation (cf. Matt. 9:21-22; Mk. 6:56). If the sickness is emotional or spiritual they will be restored accordingly.

There is a relationship between sin and sickness. In the most general sense, sickness and suffering resulted from the fall of man. But specific illnesses are also often the natural consequences of specific sins. Venereal disease is one obvious example of this. Sickness and death can also be God's means of disciplining one in sin (I Cor. 11:29-30), though this is by no means always the case. Other sickness is designed to glorify God (Jn. 9:2-3). In any case whenever we become seriously sick, we often wonder if it is because we have done something wrong. James allows for the *possibility* of sickness due to sin and encourages confession. The uncertainty of the source of the sickness is expressed by "if," while the perfect tense verb "has committed" suggests that it is possible that the sinner is now living under the

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consequences of his sin. Repentance will result in healing if sin is the root of the illness.

But James also makes it clear who the source of the healing is; "the Lord will raise him up." That is, the person shall be raised up from his sickbed by God if He so desires.

5:16a Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.

In view of the effectiveness of confession and prayer James encourages a wider usage of it. Both "confess" and "pray" indicate a habitual practice.

"Confession" in its Greek root means "to say the same thing." When we confess our sins we agree to call sin what it really is. Confession isn't made with excuses, it is a frank identification of sin as sin. We need not wait until we are bedridden with sickness or for any other occasion to confess but should confess and pray for each other as a daily practice. Regular confession is healing. Though the context implies physical healing, healing also takes place in the soul (Matt. 13:15; Jn. 12:40; Heb. 12:12-13; I Pet. 2:24). Probably both thoughts are included.

The Power of Prayer

5:16b. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.

5:17 Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain; and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months.

5:18 And he prayed again, and the sky poured rain, and the earth produced its fruit.

Although in English "prayer" is used throughout this section, here the word is better rendered "supplication" and specifically refers to a petition for something desired.

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The efficacy of the prayer is related to righteousness. Although a "righteous man" could be anyone who is justified by faith in Christ, since James is an epistle that emphasizes that faith must be lived out in daily life it is more likely that he is referring to someone who is obedient to God.

"Effective" has been variously understood. Whether it is effective because God is working in it (if the participle is a passive), or it is effective because it is the desire of a *righteous* man (if the participle is a middle voice) is not clear. Both principles are found elsewhere in Scripture (Ro. 8:26; Lk. 11:5-8; 18:1-8; Mk. 7:24-30) but the example of Elijah as a righteous man that prayed seems to fit the latter understanding better.

Elijah was an ordinary human like us but he prayed and his prayer was remarkably answered.

James describes Elijah as praying earnestly. That is, his prayer was sincere and came from the depth of his being. When Elijah prayed that it might not rain God answered and it did not rain for three and one half years (cf. Lk. 4:25; I Ki. 17:1-18:1 - the three years mentioned in I Ki. 18:1 does not include the time before he arrived in Zarephath). When he prayed again the rains returned. (I Ki. 18:41-45).

James' emphasis is on the power of prayer that is available to ordinary people. God stopped the normal cycle of the earth in response to the prayer of Elijah. This, of course, does not mean that Elijah could stop the rain at will, but rather because he was righteous and his thoughts aligned themselves with the thoughts of God, God used Elijah's prayer as the medium to accomplish His will.

Elijah's prayer revealed a vibrant faith.

CLOSING COMMENTS

5:19 My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back,

5:20 let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins.

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It is possible that verses 19-20 are a conclusion to verses 16-18, but it also makes a fitting conclusion to the entire book. There is no connecting particle that requires a formal connection to verse 18 and in other places where James begins with "my brethren" (2:1 & 3:1) he is making an abrupt change in subject matter. Those who are straying are those who have a deficient view of faith. They are the ones who believe that faith is profession without transformation.

The idea of straying was often associated with wandering sheep (Ezek. 34:4; Matt. 18:12; I Pet. 2:25). In this case the person is "among" the brethren but they are wandering from truth. Being around Christians or present in a Christian assembly doesn't make you a Christian, so the one straying could either be descriptive of a Christian deceived by worldliness, or of an unbeliever who is demonstrating an untransformed heart. In either case they are in serious error and need to turn.

The one who succeeds in turning such a person from his erroneous thinking about faith saves his soul from death and results in forgiveness. This seems to clearly be referring to spiritual salvation from eternal death.