

James 5: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] James chapter 5. Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you, and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. Behold, the wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous person.

He does not resist you. Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged. Behold, the judge is standing at the door. As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we consider those blessed who remain steadfast.

You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth, or by any other oath. But let your yes be yes and your no be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation. Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.

Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. 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. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain. And for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins. James chapter 5 begins with a similar section to that which concluded chapter 4.

[2 : 3 7] It begins with come now, followed by a condemnation of the self-assured rich. It leads into a consideration of approaching judgment, in which the unrighteous rich will be condemned and afflicted, and the righteous poor delivered and vindicated. The denunciation with which the chapter begins addresses non-Christians. This isn't because they would have been among the hearers, but rather to encourage the righteous that they will be vindicated. This denunciation sounds like that of an Old Testament prophet. We might hear, for instance, the words of Isaiah chapter 13 verse 6, Wail, for the day of the Lord is near, as destruction from the Almighty it will come.

James is anticipating this coming day of the Lord. We should not assume that this is merely the final judgment, although it might have one eye towards that. Rather, devastating judgment on Jerusalem, and on the Jewish persecutors of the early church, is about to come. James is writing to Jews who have experienced persecution at the hands of their compatriots at a time shortly before the bloody destruction of Jerusalem in 1870. Again, this is reminiscent of the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew chapter 6 verses 19 to 21. Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Again, it is similar to the woes that Jesus gives to the rich and to the unrighteous, and also to things such as the parable of the rich fool, in Luke chapter 12 verses 16 to 21.

And he told them a parable, saying, The land of a rich man produced plentifully. And he thought to himself, What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops? And he said, I will do this. I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years. Relax, eat, drink, be merry. But God said to him, Fool, this night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be. So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God. It is foolish to rely upon these treasures. But the rich have placed their hope in them. And the sand is draining now from the hourglass. Their riches will testify against them. They have been accumulating these riches through sinful oppression, and they have also not been using them to aid the poor who were in desperate need at that time. We might remember the parable of the unjust steward and the statement concerning unrighteous mammon in Luke chapter 16 verse 9. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings. Again in Luke chapter 12 verses 33 to 34. Sell your possessions and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with money bags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. James, like so many of the

Old Testament prophets, is concerned deeply with economic injustice and oppression of the poor. Wealth at that time was being concentrated in the hands of a smaller group of rich landowners, and poorer people were being oppressed and defrauded. The money that they had been denied for their difficult labours is described like blood crying out to the Lord from the ground, like the blood of Abel that called out against Cain, it calls for judgment upon them. Possessions and money are not neutral media. Our money and the luxuries that we enjoy at the expense of the mistreatment and oppression of others cries out to God against us on behalf of them. The rich have fattened their hearts, yet they are in a day of slaughter, and this marks them out for destruction. The righteous, oppressed person is condemned and murdered. Justice is twisted against him, and his life is threatened by oppression. Yet he does not fight back. God, however, will come to his aid. Speaking to poor Christians in a situation like this, James wants them to learn the importance of patience. They should not retaliate. They should look to the Lord. They should not be envious of the wicked. They should consider the end of the wicked.

Douglas Moose suggests that we might notice the parallels with Old Testament statements, like those of Psalm 37 verses 1 to 12. Fret not yourself because of evildoers. Be not envious of wrongdoers, for they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb. Trust in the Lord and do good. Dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness. Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord, trust in him, and he will act. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday. Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him. Fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices. Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath. Fret not yourself, it tends only to evil. For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land. In just a little while the wicked will be no more. Though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there. But the meek shall inherit the land, and delight themselves in abundant peace. Like the rain, God's vindication will come as we patiently wait for and seek it. The temptation in such a situation of persecution would be to grumble against or to each other. But they must resist that. God the judge is near at hand, and they must act accordingly. They must learn from the examples of suffering and patience given by the prophets, and by people such as Job. Job's patient persistence in faith is a pattern to follow, especially when we recognize the Lord's purpose and goodness in his story. He warns them about oaths.

[8 : 55] This is similar to Matthew chapter 5 verses 33 to 37. Once again a connection with the Sermon on the Mount. Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn. But I say to you, do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply yes or no. Anything more than this comes from evil.

There is the danger of invoking God's name in an oath. God the judge is at hand, and we must speak and act in the light of this. Truthfulness, care, and candour in speech are absolutely essential.

He speaks to the situation of suffering and sickness. Once again he encourages people to pray. If they are suffering, the response is to pray. If they are cheerful, they should sing praise.

Our emotional state should provoke us to render our hearts to God in speech, in the speech of prayer and in the speech of praise. A healthy Christian life is always one in which we express our inner states to God, presenting ourselves and our hearts to him. And he also stresses the importance of prayer in response to sickness. In response to sickness, it is not just the individual prayer, but the prayer of the church. The elders of the church, mature members of the church who can also represent the church as a body, should come to the person who's sick. They should pray over that person and anoint that person with oil in the name of the Lord. This is done so that the person who is sick will be saved, that the Lord will raise him up. This raising up is not merely a deliverance from sickness. It might take that form, but it looks to something greater. We suffer with Christ so that we might be raised with him.

Christ is the anointed one. And at that time of sickness, when that person might feel most isolated from the body of Christ, the body of Christ should come to them and anoint them so that they know that they are a member of the anointed one, so that they might approach and face the enemy of sickness and death with the confidence that they are doing so in the name of Christ, facing it as those anointed for a mission, and with the confidence that they will be raised up through it, that they will experience God's deliverance through suffering. We have a God who physically heals people, and we should not be surprised if people are physically healed in such situations. But we should also recognize that much of the time, God will call people to go through suffering and even to death, and that they will experience the raising up, as secure in the knowledge that they are in Christ, they face death without fear, manifesting the victory of Christ over the one who held people in bondage to the fear of death, and looking forward to the deliverance of resurrection on that last day. And at that moment, when we feel ourselves to be on the threshold of final judgment, we are assured once again of the forgiveness of our sins. What sins we have committed are forgiven us, and we are assured of access into

[12 : 09] God's very presence. We must pray for each other in response to sin and spiritual failure. Sins obstruct the hearing of our prayers. Hearing of prayers, for instance here, in the context of sickness.

We must be those who settle accounts with God and man swiftly, and illness may particularly prompt us to do this. In moments when we feel our great need for God to come to our aid, we may become keenly aware of all the unrepented sins that lie between us and him. At such times, we must confess our faults to our neighbours, set things right with them, and confess our sins against God. As we do so, all the things that would prevent us from coming to God with a whole and undivided heart will be removed. Prayer is powerful and effective, but it can be obstructed by sin. This has been a continuing theme of James' book.

He began in chapter 1 by talking about the prayer for wisdom, a prayer for wisdom that must be made with a whole heart. In chapter 4, he discussed the failure of our prayers because of our uncontrolled desires. Prayer doesn't rest upon superpowers. Elijah was a human person like us, yet he prayed, and there were three and a half years of drought. And then he prayed again, and there was rain. The three and a half years here might make us think of that period of time of judgment, a time, times, and half a time, or 42 months. There is a connection, perhaps, to the theme of judgment and vindication. Faced with the great oppression of the rich, the early Christians that James is writing to might have felt the need to be like the persistent widow in praying for vindication against their adversary. The book ends with a call to action. We must look after each other. We must bring back any who are wandering. We are called to be our brother's keeper. We might here think of the commission of Ezekiel in chapter 3 verses 17 to 21 of his prophecy. Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, you shall surely die, and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, or from his wicked way, he shall die for his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul. Again, if a righteous person turns from his righteousness, and commits injustice, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die. Because you have not warned him, he shall die for his sin, and his righteous deeds that he has done shall not be remembered, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the righteous person not to sin, and he does not sin, he shall surely live, because he took warning, and you will have delivered your soul. Sin leads to death, and we must treat it with the utmost seriousness, not just for ourselves, but also for our neighbours. A question to consider, what are some particular things that we might do in order more seriously to seek the hearing of our prayers by the Lord?