

## JAMES 5

### PATIENTLY WAITING FOR JESUS' RETURN

Would you turn with me please to James chapter 5, the last chapter in our short series on the book of James.

Once again, it is a very challenging passage of scripture, and so as we examine it, we do so, seeking the grace and strength of God to put these principles into practice. Because, in fact, that is the whole theme of this letter isn't it? Putting our faith into practice. Because if your faith doesn't impact the way you live and result in a transformed life, it's not true faith at all, it's mere intellectual belief – and as James has already pointed out, belief alone cannot save you.

Now in this final chapter, James turns his attention toward the impending return of Jesus, and as he does so, he has three messages for three different groups of people: there is a warning to the wealthy, encouragement to the faithful and an exhortation to the sinful.

So let's examine each of these. Firstly, a **warning to the wealthy. This is in verses 1-6**, and James doesn't pull any punches here. He starts off by telling the rich people to weep and wail because of the misery coming upon them (v.1).

The misery he is referring to is the coming judgment of God which they will face when Jesus returns and they will finally have to give an account of their lives. This is made clearer in verse 3 by the reference to their flesh being eaten by fire. And James then gives three reasons why these rich people will come under God's judgment unless they repent:

- They have hoarded their wealth (v.3)
- They have been dishonest with their wealth – not paying people fairly and honestly (v.4)
- They have been selfish with their wealth – living in luxury but not being generous to others (v.5)

And because of this, they will one day face the judgment of God. There is an echo here of Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man was selfish and greedy and completely lacking in generosity, and in the end he faced the displeasure of God and eternal punishment.

Brothers and sisters, there is a clear reminder here that God is very concerned about how we use our money and possessions. We are called to be generous, and when we read the rest of the New Testament we are given four very clear reasons why we should be generous:

**Firstly**, because God himself is generous and calls us to emulate his generous heart (James 1:17; Rom 8:32).

**Secondly**, our generosity ought to arise as an act of thanksgiving for the grace that God has generously shown each of us (2 Cor 9:11)

**Thirdly**, our generosity should also be motivated by compassion for the needs of others and for the needs of God's church (Acts 20:35).

**And fourthly**, our generosity ought to also flow from our understanding that the good things that we have in this life are all very temporary (Matt 6:19-21). We hold them very briefly in our hands for a few short years and then we leave them behind when we cross the veil of eternity – either at the return of Jesus or at our death. And so, we ought not to hold onto them too tightly and selfishly. When God blesses us with money and possessions, he does so in order that we might be a blessing to others.

You can't take your money and possessions with you when you die. They are yours temporarily, on loan from God himself, to be used to bless others.

Is God calling you to reassess your own use of money and possessions – to reassess your giving? Is he calling you to open your hand, to stop clinging to your wealth so tightly, and to live a life of generosity and compassion, knowing that one day, perhaps very soon, you will have to give an account to him for the way you have used these things.? I really encourage you to give some thought to this over this next week.

## ENCOURAGEMENT TO THE FAITHFUL

Secondly, in verses 7 – 12, James then moves on to give words of encouragement to Christians who are doing it tough – who appear to be oppressed and unfairly treated by those who are wealthy. It appears that even within the church itself, there are the haves and the have nots; the wealthy believers who are being selfish and greedy, and the poor believers who are suffering and being treated unfairly. And after rebuking the wealthy and reminding them of their looming judgment, James now encourages the poor believers by reminding them of a simple yet profound truth – and it's something that we all need to grasp hold of and be continually conscious of:

And that truth is, in the words of the Christian singer, Larry Norman, we are only visiting this planet. Our sojourn here is very brief. In the light of eternity, this life is the merest flicker of a candle, and it won't be long until we are in the eternal joyful presence of our loving Heavenly Father.

And so, in verse 7, James says to these suffering Christians . Remember that this life is not all there is. This is only a very temporary situation that we find ourselves in.

In the next few verses, James uses the words “patience” and “perseverance” six times, and then in verses 10-11 he gives an example of perseverance, referring to the many prophets of the past who persevered through trials and tribulations because of their own eternal perspective and their trust in God.

Brothers and sisters, are some of you facing suffering of some kind? Financial hardship? Physical suffering? Problems and difficulties that weigh you down and sometimes seem too great to bear?

This passage exhorts us to two things:

**Firstly**, to hold onto our hope of heaven and the ultimate return of Jesus, and to let that eternal perspective give us the strength to persevere through this world's difficulties and trials.

But **secondly**, as we go through this world's sometimes painful trials, James calls us to throw ourselves upon the compassion and mercy of God, and to seek his strength. In verse 12, he reminds these suffering believers, ***“The Lord is full of compassion and mercy”***.

So, trust in him, and cast your cares upon him, for he promises to strengthen and sustain you. In the words of the Apostle Peter:

***“Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” (1 Peter 5:6-7)***

## EXHORTATION TO THE SINFUL

Finally, as James continues to think of the coming return of Jesus, he concludes with a sobering word in verses 13-20 for those who are caught up in sin`.

Now, I have to say that in my opinion this is one of the most misinterpreted passages in the whole of the New Testament. And the reason it is so commonly misinterpreted is because people ignore the context of these verses.

So let's go straight to the verses which are the primary source of confusion for many people – verses 14-15:

***“Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up.”***

Now, on the surface, this seems to be advocating universal healing for all Christians of every sickness and disease. Are you sick? Got a cold? The flu? Covid? Cancer? It doesn't matter – whatever you've got, just go to the elders of the church, get them to pray for you and anoint you with oil, and you will be healed. Every time! I mean this seems to be a watertight, universal promise doesn't it?

Well, as with any passage of the Bible, context is everything! Context is King. So let me explain the context of this promise of healing. James is not speaking about universal healing for every sickness here. He is referring to a very specific situation: sickness that is brought about by the discipline of God because of a person's sin. And the biblical context of the rest of the letter of James, both before and after these verses, points to this interpretation.

In the chapters leading up to this passage, we read of a long list of sins that some people in the church are guilty of:

- Bitter envy and selfish ambition (3:14)
- Fights and quarrels (4:1)
- Hedonistic pleasure seeking (4:3)
- They are called “adulterous people” and “enemies of God” (4:4)
- Slander and judging others (4:11)

And because of this, James has already issued a strong command for them to repent. Listen again to his urgent plea in chapter 4:

***“Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. <sup>8</sup> Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. <sup>9</sup> Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. <sup>10</sup> Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.” (4:7-10)***

Verse 10 is particularly important, because it points to the fact that God has brought them low because of their sin, as an act of discipline. The promise that God will lift them up if they repent is a promise to remove his discipline from them, and in the passage we are looking at, in chapter 5, it becomes clear that that discipline is sickness. God has brought sickness upon some people in the church, in order to lead them to repentance.

Let's return to these verses in chapter 5, but this time we will read the verses that immediately follow. Starting at verse 14 again:

***“Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up, ...”***

We've already read those words, but now let's read on:

***“... If they have sinned they will be forgiven” (v.15)***

The English word “If” used in some translations here is a weak word, indicating uncertainty ... maybe they've sinned & maybe they haven't. But the Greek word used here is much stronger and more definite:

“kan” which means “even though” or “although”. ***“Even though you have sinned, you will be forgiven.”*** And some translations pick up this stronger meaning.

This verse is telling us that their sin is the cause of their sickness, and that once they repent, God will remove their sickness from them. This is made even clearer in the next verse (verse 16):

***“Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.” (v.16)***

Confess and repenting of their sins will lead to the end of God’s judgment and to healing.

This is made even clearer by the next two verses (verses 17 & 18) where James refers to the drought that Israel experienced as a result of Elijah’s prayer and then the lifting of that drought. What is the relevance of this reminder of something from Israel’s distant past? Quite simply, the drought they experienced back then was God’s punishment for the sin of the nation, and the lifting of the drought took place only once they had repented.

So James is saying that just as God removed his punishment from the entire nation once they had repented, so too, God will remove his discipline from these people by healing their sicknesses once they also repent.

And just in case you are in ANY DOUBT about all of this, James concludes with these final words, linking their current sickness with their need to repent:

***“My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, <sup>20</sup> remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.” (vv.19-20)***

So let me clarify here: this promise of healing in verses 14-15, is not a blanket promise that God will heal our every sickness and it must not be used in that way. It is a very specific promise that God will cease his discipline of Christians if they repent. It is only speaking about sickness that is temporarily brought about by the discipline of God, to bring us to repentance.

Nowhere in scripture are Christians given the promise that they won’t ever get sick or that they will always be healed if they do. Nowhere! Indeed, in the New Testament, we read of two instances of Paul being sick, as well as the sickness of other prominent believers such as Trophimus and Timothy, all of whom were **not** healed, but had to cope with their illnesses and ailments.

So can I strongly urge, if you have used this passage in James to claim universal healing for all sickness, please stop. Universal healing is not a biblical doctrine and in fact this wrong belief can cause great damage to people’s faith if they are not healed.

Of course God can and does heal from time to time, and we rejoice when he does. And those occasional instances of healing are a foretaste of heaven when we will finally receive our promised inheritance of perfect, eternal health. But it’s not something we can claim as a universal promise for this life. It’s an inheritance we must patiently wait for.

## CONCLUSION

In this final chapter, James has turned his attention to the imminent return of Jesus, when Jesus will judge all mankind and finally usher in his eternal heavenly kingdom.

And in the light of that great, approaching Day, James makes three strong exhortations:

The wealthy must open their hands and their hearts and live generously, knowing that they will soon have to give an account of their lives to Jesus.

The faithful are encouraged to be patient and persevere in the face of suffering, knowing that their suffering is only temporary and that an eternity of joy awaits them.

And finally, those who are caught up in sin and are currently under God's discipline, need to repent and have their discipline removed, while there is still time, before our redeemer and judge returns, at which point it will be too late to repent.

And underlying all this, is the great theme of the entire letter, that our faith, if it is genuine, must result in a changed life, so that what we believe on the inside is evident in the godly way that we live our lives.

May the Lord impress these things upon your heart and help you to live a life that truly honours him and brings glory to Jesus.