

STUDY ON THE BOOK OF JAMES

THE RICH AND THE COMING JUDGMENT!

Read James 5:1-8

Introduction

In this last chapter of the book of James, James gives a dire warning: God has noticed what is going on, and the judgment is coming. James lays out the charges against wealthy antagonists. These are crimes they will pay for when God's judgment comes on the day of the Lord. According to this passage, these selfish people have hoarded wealth while others suffered in poverty. They have cheated their workers out of earned wages. They have lived in luxury while others lived in squalor. They have used their influence in a rigged court system to take more from the poor—even to kill the innocent.

Then James turns back to his oppressed Christian readers in their suffering. He urges them to stay patient as they wait. The day of the Lord, the very same one that their oppressors should be dreading, is one they can look forward to. It will come. The Lord is standing at the door and ready.

The Rich and the Illusion of Wealth.

“Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you! Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days.” (vv1-3)

James had developed the idea of the need for complete dependence on God (please refer to our last study). He now naturally rebuked those most likely to live independently from God — the rich. While Jesus counted some rich persons among His followers (such as Zaccheus, Joseph of Armithea, and Barnabas), we are compelled to observe that riches do present an additional and significant obstacle to the kingdom (Matthew 19:23-24). It is also true that the pursuit or love of riches is a motivation for every conceivable sin (1 Timothy 6:10).

In the style of an Old Testament prophet, James tells the rich to mourn in consideration of their destiny (the miseries that are coming upon you). In the life to come, their riches will be revealed as corrupted, moth-eaten, and corroded. James probably refers to the destruction of three kinds of wealth. Stores of food are corrupted (rotted), garments are moth-eaten, and gold and silver are corroded. Each one of them comes to nothing in their own way.

More than that, James adds, with a touch of horror, the rust will devour (or corrode) your flesh like fire, you are so bound up with your greedy gains; your wealth perishes, and you perish with it and by it, eaten away in burning pain. I guess it is better to weep here, where there are wiping handkerchiefs in the hand of Christ, than to have your eyes whipped out in hell. Better howl with men than yell with devils.

The corruptible nature of the wealth of the rich will witness against them. On the day of judgment, it will be revealed that they have lived their lives in the arrogant independence James previously condemned, heaping up earthly treasure in the last days, when they should have been heaping up treasure in heaven (Luke 18:22).

The Rich are Indicted

“Indeed, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. You have lived on the earth in pleasure

and luxury; you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter. You have condemned, you have murdered the just; he does not resist you.” (vv3-6)

James indicts the rich with these sins:

Hoarding wealth and not sharing it. The word translated "hoarded wealth" (NIV) or "heaped treasure together" (KJV) is Greek thesaurizō, "lay-up, store up, gather, save." Saving for the future is prudent (Proverbs 21:20), but that isn't what James has in mind. Our Lord Jesus had preached on this theme:

"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." (Matthew 6:19-21)

According to Judaism of Jesus' day, one stored up treasures in heaven by giving alms to the poor (Mark 10:21). To hoard one's wealth without assisting the poor is a symptom of greed -- greed that has captured one's heart. The rich can be guilty of the sin of greed. The poor also can be just as greedy.

Withholding just compensation from one's employees. Those of us who are employers have a special responsibility before God to pay our employees adequately and promptly. And I suppose it extends to paying those promptly from whom we receive goods and services -- paying our bills. We cannot, we must not defraud those who have a financial claim on us. The rich in James' day did this all too often.

Living in luxury (softness) and self-indulgence. What luxuries were enjoyed by the rich in the First Century? Servants, indoor plumbing (at least by some of the Romans), special imported foods and beverages, fine clothes, ready transportation. Are luxuries bad or wrong? The word translated "live in luxury" in verse 5 is Greek tryphaō, "to lead a life of luxury or self-indulgence, live for pleasure, revel, carouse," The luxuries that wealth can afford are not bad. It's the "soft life" that James is getting at. The ideas are further conveyed by the word NIV translates "self-indulgence," Greek spatalaō, "to indulge oneself beyond the bounds of propriety, live luxuriously or voluptuously."

When we pamper ourselves and indulge our every whim, we become arrogant. We come to expect this standard of living as our right. We easily begin to make decisions based on our own creature comfort rather than on God's will.

Condemning and killing the innocent. To those for whom their standard of living is all-important, human life itself can become less valuable. Often those who are poor and without power in this world have little satisfaction from justice. Yet God hears their cries, and He is the one who guarantees to ultimately right every wrong and answer every injustice. Two evils related to the cheapness of human life are prominent in our high-tech world: abortion and euthanasia. I doubt that this is what James had in mind. He was thinking of how the rich snuff out their opposers, but I can't help but wonder.

The Coming of the Lord

"Therefore, be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand." (vv7-8)

In contrast to a mindset that thinks of fulfilling every want and desire right now, we have the mindset of the humble Christian believer. James speaks about the Second Coming of Christ twice in as many verses.

Throughout the New Testament we see the clear promise of Christ's return at the end of the age. Jesus told parables of a man who goes away on a long trip and puts his servants in charge. Then he returns

quickly to find them either drunk and abusive or faithful and eager and rewards them. Jesus gives us signs to expect -- wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, the appearance of the Antichrist. Some Christian teachers have imagined that we can predict the Day of his return. But the purpose of the scriptures is to help us to be ready, not to know of a certainty when our Master will return.

Biblical Christians live in two worlds, the here and now where we work and love and have babies and witness for Christ, and in heavenly places, in an intimate relationship to God who promises to wrap up events on this earth in righteousness and justice. We live in the Now but with a constant expectation of the Day to come.

We live, not just for the here-and-now, but for the Day when the world will change, when Christ will be revealed, when justice will reign, where every private action will become public, and nothing will be hidden. Sometimes we get impatient or unbelieving, but we must wait and be patient for the return of our Lord. Many have scoffed about this day coming but we will be wise to listen to what Peter has to say:

“... knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, “Where is the promise of His coming?” (2 Peter 3:3-4)

But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. (2 Peter 3:8-10)

A farmer does not give up when his crop does not come to harvest immediately. He keeps on working even when the crop cannot be seen at all. Even so Christians must work hard and exercise patient endurance even when the harvest day seems far away.

When we think about it, the waiting and need for endurance we have in the Christian life is very much like the waiting of the farmer.

- He waits with a reasonable hope and expectation of reward.
- He waits a long time.
- He waits working all the while.
- He waits depending on things out of his own power; with his eye on the heavens.
- He waits despite changing circumstances and many uncertainties.
- He waits encouraged by the value of the harvest.
- He waits encouraged by the work and harvest of others.
- He waits because he really has no other option.
- He waits because it does no good to give up.
- He waits aware of how the seasons work.
- He waits because as time goes on, it becomes more important and not less to do so.

Early and Latter Rain

he pictures of the early and latter rain should be taken literally as James intends. He refers to the early rains (coming in late October or early November) that were essential to soften the ground for plowing, and to the latter rains (coming in late April or May) which were essential to the maturing of the crops shortly before harvest. There is no allegorical picture here of an early and a latter outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the church.

The soon return of Jesus requires that we have established hearts, hearts that are rooted in Jesus and His eternal resolution of all things.