

THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

“Book of Faith, or Epistle of Straw?”

JAMES – Chapter Five

BIBLE STUDY PRESENTATION @ SESSION #7

(In this and previous study sessions, three translations of the Holy Bible are used; they are identified as THE AMPLIFIED BIBLE [AMP], THE MESSAGE [MSG], and THE NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION [NRSV].)

A GENERAL INTRODUCTION to this final chapter/session –

James opens with a strong condemnation of the rich who were living in pleasure and luxury, but who were oppressing the poor. Most likely these were rich unbelievers such as those mentioned earlier (cf. 2:6-7). The Lord heard the cries of those defrauded, and judgment was to come upon the rich who condemned and murdered the just. This passage may possibly be an allusion to the destruction of Jerusalem foretold by Jesus in Matthew 24 and fulfilled in 70 A.D. James counsels his brethren to patiently wait for the coming of the Lord, and to establish their hearts. Using a farmer, the prophets, and Job as examples of patience, James also warns about grumbling against one another and swearing rash oaths. (vss. 1-12)

The last half of the chapter provides a call to prayer and praise. The suffering are to pray; the cheerful are to sing praises; and, the sick are to call for the elders of the church. The elders were to pray over the sick and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. What is sometimes questioned is whether the anointing was sacramental or medicinal. In answer to the prayer of faith, the Lord will raise the sick and also forgive sins if they had been committed. In this context James encourages Christians to confess their sins to one another and to pray for one another that they may be healed. He reminds them of the value of fervent prayer by the righteous, using Elijah as an example of how God answers prayer providentially. The book then closes with a reminder that turning a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins. (vss. 13-20)

TRUE RELIGION DISPLAYS PATIENCE UNDER OPPRESSION (JAMES 5:1-12)

A) GOD’S ANGER AT RICH OPPRESSORS (vss. 1-6)

[AMP] *“Come now, you rich [people], weep aloud and lament over the miseries (the woes) that are surely coming upon you. ²Your abundant wealth has rotted and is ruined, and your [many] garments have become moth-eaten. ³Your gold and silver are completely rusted through, and their rust will be testimony against you and*

it will devour your flesh as if it were fire. You have heaped together treasure for the last days. ⁴[But] **look!** [Here are] *the wages that you have withheld by fraud from the laborers who have reaped your fields, crying out* [for vengeance]; *and the cries of the harvesters have come to the ears of the Lord of hosts.* ⁵[Here] *on earth you have abandoned yourselves to soft* (prodigal) *living and to* [the pleasures of] *self-indulgence and self-gratification. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.* ⁶*You have condemned and have murdered the righteous* (innocent man), [while] *he offers no resistance to you.*”

[MSG] “And a final word to you arrogant rich: Take some lessons in lament. You’ll need buckets for the tears when the crash comes upon you. Your money is corrupt and your fine clothes stink. Your greedy luxuries are a cancer in your gut, destroying your life from within. You thought you were piling up wealth. What you’ve piled up is judgment. All the workers you’ve exploited and cheated cry out for judgment. The groans of the workers you used and abused are a roar in the ears of the Master Avenger. You’ve looted the earth and lived it up. But all you’ll have to show for it is a fatter than usual corpse. In fact, what you’ve done is condemn and murder perfectly good persons, who stand there and take it.”

Facilitator’s Comments:

1. In the opening verses of this chapter, James has two aims:
 - a) To show the ultimate worthlessness of all earthly riches
 - b) To show the detestable character of those who possess riches that have been accumulated by oppressing others
2. The vividness of the picture of those... *weeping, wailing, lamenting* ... is intensified by the strength of the Greek verb used: **OLOLUZEIN** – most accurately translated: **“to shriek;”** the same word is used by the O.T. prophet, Amos, to describe those undergoing the tortures of the damned in hell!
3. James proclaims the worthlessness of riches ... not the worthlessness of the rich. Today’s money will be worthless when Christ returns, so we should spend our time accumulating treasure that will be worthwhile in God’s eternal kingdom.
4. Intrinsically, money is not the problem; Christians need money to live and to support their families; Christian leaders need money to effectively support the work of the church in the spreading the gospel. It is the intentional accumulation of wealth, at the expense of

others, and then greedily holding on to and displaying this wealth that appears to be under attack. Parallel N.T. references are noted below:

- a) [**1 Timothy 6:10**] *“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith...”*
 - b) [**Matthew 6:19-21**] *“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consume and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*
5. In biblical times there were three main sources of wealth. James uses special words to describe the decay of each of them:
- a) There was corn and grain. This is the wealth that grows rotten (Gk: “**SEPEIN**”)
 - b) There were splendid garments which quickly became food for moths (Gk: “**SETOBROTOS**”)
 - Remember the changes of fine garments that Joseph gave to his brothers after disclosing his true identity to them in Egypt (Genesis 45:22)
 - St. Paul claimed that he coveted no man’s money or apparel (Acts 20:33)
 - c) Silver and Gold. The point James makes here is that even these precious metals, which are indestructible, are doomed to decay. (Gk. “**KATIASTHAI**”)
6. “**Rust**,” in the multiple forms which James so vividly describes, is proof of the impermanence and ultimate lack of value of all earthly things. The desire for these things is like a dreaded cancer eating into human bodies and souls. Then there comes some grim sarcasm from James – *any human who concentrates on heaping up these things will only possess the treasure of a consuming fire, which in the end will completely wipe out everything!*
7. The “**righteous one**” refers to a defenseless person, probably a poor laborer. Poor people who could not pay their debts were regularly thrown into prison and/or forced to sell all their possessions. At times they were even forced to sell family members (*wives, children*) into slavery. With no opportunity to work off their debts, poor people often died of starvation. God called this murder. Hoarding money, exploiting employees, and living self-indulgently does not escape God’s notice.

8. No other book in the Holy Bible has such a concern for Christian ethics, and condemns dishonest and selfish wealth with such a searing passion, as does the Book of James. The reasons for God's anger are these:
- a) The selfish rich have gained their **wealth by injustice** [*whereas, Scripture teaches that the laborer is worthy of his hire* (LK 10:7; 1 Tim 5:18)]
 - They have defrauded the laborers who mowed their fields
 - Keeping back wages owed to them
 - But the cries of the reapers have been heard by the Lord of Sabaoth (Hosts)
 - b) The selfish rich have **used their wealth selfishly**. **TRUPHEIN** is a Greek word meaning to live in soft luxury. It comes from a root which means to break down, and describes the soft living which in the end destroys a human's moral fiber. **SPATALAN** is best translated "*to play the wanton*" and means to live in lewdness and lasciviousness; to totally succumb to and satisfy the worst lusts imaginable.
 - They have lived in luxury and pleasure;
 - fattened their hearts in a day of slaughter;
 - They have condemned and murdered the just who do not resist them
 - c) But, anyone who chooses this path has also chosen its end. The end of specially fattened cattle is that they will be slaughtered for some feast; the end for humans who have chosen this path of pleasure is grief; the goal of their luxury is death.

A BREAK for DISCUSSION:

1. What is the major difference between James previous words in chapter 2 and his address here?
2. What new insights do you have reading James 5:1-6?
3. Is this the same message that Jesus provided in Luke 12:15-22?

(Continuing further under heading ... TRUE RELIGION DISPLAYS PATIENCE UNDER OPPRESSION)

B) A CALL FOR PATIENCE UNDER OPPRESSION (vss. 7-12)

[AMP] ***“So be patient, brethren [as you wait] till the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits expectantly for the precious harvest from the land. [See how] he keeps up his patient [vigil] over it until it receives the early and late rains. ⁸So you also must be patient. Establish your hearts [strengthen and confirm them in the final certainty], for the coming of the Lord is very near. ⁹Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you [yourselves] may not be judged. Look! The Judge is [already] standing at the very door. ¹⁰ [As] an example of suffering and ill-treatment together with patience, brethren, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord [as His messengers]. ¹¹You know how we call those blessed (happy) who were steadfast [who endured]. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the Lord’s [purpose and how He richly blessed him in the] end, inasmuch as the Lord is full of pity and compassion and tenderness and mercy. ¹²But above all [things], my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath; but let you yes be [a simple] yes, and your no be [a simple] no, so that you may not sin and fall under condemnation.”***

[MSG] ***“Meanwhile, friends, wait patiently for the Master’s arrival. You see farmers do this all the time, waiting for their valuable crops to mature, patiently letting the rain do it’s slow but sure work. Be patient like that. Stay steady and strong. The Master could arrive at any time. Friends, don’t complain about each other. A far greater complaint could be lodged against you, you know. The Judge is standing just around the corner. Take the old prophets as your mentors. They put up with anything, went through everything and never once quit, all the time honoring God. What a gift life is to those who stay the course! You’ve heard, of course, of Job’s staying power, and you know how God brought it all together for him at the end. That’s because God cares, cares right down to the last detail. And since you know that he cares, let your language show it. Don’t add words like “I swear to God” to your own words. Don’t show your impatience by concocting oaths to hurry up God. Just say yes or no. Just say what is true. That way, your language can’t be used against you.”***

FACILITATOR'S COMMENTS:

1. (vss. 7-8) The farmer must wait patiently for his crops to grow; he cannot hurry the process; the early (Oct/Nov) and late (Apr/May) rains are vitally necessary. But he does not take the growing season off and hope that all goes well. There is much work to do to ensure a good harvest. In the same way, we must wait patiently for Christ's return. We cannot make him come back any sooner. But while we wait, there is much that we can do to advance God's kingdom. Both the farmer and the Christian must live by faith, looking toward the future reward for their labors. Don't live as if Christ will never come. Work faithfully to build His Kingdom – the King will come when the time is ripe.

- a) **The early Church lived in constant expectation of the second coming of Jesus Christ and used 3 different words to describe it:**

- **PAROUSIA** – in Greek is the ordinary word for someone's presence or arrival; but it has two other usages:
 - It describes the invasion of a country by an army
 - It is used of a visit of a king or governor to a part of his empire

When this word is used of Jesus, it implies that the Lord of heaven is making the final invasion of earth to receive the lasting submission and adoration of his subjects

- **EIPHANEIA** – in ordinary Greek, this word, too, has multiple usages:
 - It is used of the appearance of a god to his worshipper
 - It is used of the accession of an emperor to the imperial power of Rome

When this word is used of Jesus, it means that his Second Coming is the appearance of God to his people, both to those who await him and those who disregard him.

- **APOKALUPSIS** – means an unveiling or a laying bare

When this word is used applying to Jesus, it means that his second coming is the laying bare of the power and glory of God to humans

- b) Several generalizations can be made about the teaching of the Second Coming as it is described in the N.T. –

- It is clear that no one other than God knows the day/hour; not even Jesus himself (MT. 24:36; MK. 13:32)
- It will come as sudden as the lightning; like a thief in the night (MT. 24:27, 37, 39; 1 Thess. 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10). We

cannot prepare for its coming; we must be ready when it happens. Therefore believers must be:

- Constantly watchful
- Vigilant and not despair over its delay
- Prepared – blameless in body and spirit
- In fellowship with one another
- “Abiding in Christ”

c) The great truth behind all biblical portrayals of the Second Coming is that this world is not purposeless; but, that there is one far-off divine event toward which all of creation is moving.

2. (vs. 9) When things go wrong, we tend to blame others for our miseries; for, blaming others is easier than owning our share of the responsibility, but it is destructive and sinful. Before you judge others for their shortcomings, remember that Christ the Judge will come to judge us [see MT. 7:1-5]. He will not let us get away with shifting the blame to others.
3. (vss. 10-11) The patience of the Prophets and of Job is described by the Greek word **HUPOMNE**. In Greek, this usage does not imply passive patience, but that of a gallant spirit; one which can wrestle with multiple experiences of questioning, sorrow, doubt and disaster; and still emerge on the “other side” filled with faith!
4. (vs. 12) Here, James seems to be repeating the teaching of Jesus (see MT 5:33-37). He was not thinking of what we today would describe as bad language, but the confirming of a statement or a promise by the taking of an oath. Especially in ancient Judaism there were distinctions made between “**binding**” and “**non-binding**” oaths. Any oath in which the name of God was used was “binding;” God became a direct partner in the transaction. Any oath which did not include direct mention of God was “non-binding.” This made a mockery of the practice of oath taking. The N.T. view is that every word spoken in the presence of God and other humans should be true; it does not entirely condemn oaths, but deplores the human tendency to falsehood which on occasion makes oaths necessary. A person with a reputation for exaggeration or lying often can’t get anyone to believe him/her on his/her word alone. Christians should never become like that. Always be honest so that others will believe your **simple yes or no**. By avoiding lies, half-truths, and omissions of the truth, we become trustworthy persons.



+ FINAL THOUGHTS FROM JAMES +

TRUE RELIGION IS BLESSED THROUGH PRAYER, SINGING AND
CONCERN FOR ERRING BRETHREN [JAMES 5:13-20]

A) THE BLESSING OF PRAYER AND SONG (5:13-18)

[AMP] ***“Is anyone among you afflicted (ill-treated, suffering evil)? He should pray. Is anyone glad at heart? He should sing praise [to God].¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? He should call in the church elders (the spiritual guides). And they should pray over him, anointing him with oil in the Lord’s name.¹⁵ And the prayer [that is] of faith will save him who is sick, and the Lord will restore him; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.¹⁶ Confess to one another therefore your faults (your slips, your false steps, your offenses, your sins) and pray [also] for one another, that you may be healed and restored [to a spiritual tone of mind and heart]. The earnest (heartfelt, continued) prayer of a righteous man makes tremendous power available [dynamic in its working].¹⁷ Elijah was a human being with a nature such as we have [with feelings, affections, and a constitution like ours]; and he prayed earnestly for it not to rain, and no rain fell on the earth for three years and six months.¹⁸ And [then] he prayed again and the heavens supplied rain and the land produced its crops [as usual].***

[MSG] **“Are you hurting? Pray. Do you feel great? Sing. Are you sick? Call the church leaders together to pray and anoint you with oil in the name of the Master. Believing-prayer will heal you, and Jesus will put you on your feet. And if you’ve sinned, you’ll be forgiven – healed inside and out. Make this your common practice: Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you can live together whole and healed. The prayer of a person living right with God is something powerful to be reckoned with. Elijah, for instance, human just like us, prayed hard that it wouldn’t rain, and it didn’t – not a drop for three and a half years. Then he prayed that it would rain, and it did. The showers came and everything started growing again.”**

FACILITATOR'S COMMENTS:

In this section of the epistle, James identifies **some central characteristics of the early church:**

1. It was a **singing church!** Early Christians were constantly breaking into song.
 - a) In St. Paul's description of meetings held in the Church at Corinth, singing was an integral part of their worship (1 Cor. 14:15, 26). When Paul thinks of the grace of God going out to the Gentiles (Romans 15:9), it reminds him of the joyous saying of the Psalmist [18:49] ***"For this I will extol you, O Lord, among the nations, and sing praises to your name."***
 - b) When Pliny, the Governor of Bithynia, wrote to Trajan, the Roman Emperor, in 111 A.D. to tell him about this new sect of Christians he had encountered, he said *"they are in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it is light, when they sing in alternate verses a hymn to Christ as God."*
 - c) By contrast, in orthodox Jewish synagogues, since the fall of Jerusalem (70 A.D.), there has been no music, for when they worship they gather in a mood of gloom, remembering a great tragedy
 - d) From its beginning up to the present time, the Christian Church has characteristically gathered in joyfulness to remember an infinite love; to celebrate a present glory; and, jubilant singing has been an integral part of its worship!

2. It was a **healing church!** Early Christians inherited this tradition from Judaism
 - a) In Judaism there was the idea that all sickness is due to sin. It was a deeply-rooted Jewish belief that where there were sickness and suffering, there must have been sin. Therefore, when a Jew was ill, he/she went to the Rabbi, not to a medical doctor. The Rabbi anointed him/her with oil and prayed over that person. From antiquity, there comes a memorable quote from Galen – the Greek doctor – who calls this treatment *"the best of all remedies for paralysis."*
 - b) James seems to refer to someone who is incapacitated physically. Keep in mind that in Scripture, oil was both a medicine (*see the Parable of the Good Samaritan* [LK. 10:30-37]) and a symbol of the Spirit of God (*as used in anointing kings* [1 Samuel 16:1-13]). Thus **oil can represent both the medical and the spiritual spheres of life.** Christians should not separate the physical and the spiritual – Jesus Christ is Lord over both the human body and the human spirit.
 - c) One of the earliest known books about church administration is the **Canon of Hippolytus**, dating to the end of the 2nd or early 3rd century A.D. It is there written that those who have the gift of healing are to be ordained as presbyters, after a

- thorough investigation has been made to ensure that they really do possess the gift and that it comes from God. In the same book there is a prayer to be used when bishops are consecrated; a portion of that prayer reads: *“Grant unto him, O Lord . . . the power to break all the chains of evil power of the demons, to cure all the sick . . . and speedily to subdue Satan beneath his feet.”*
- d) It was not the exclusive responsibility of males (clergy and non-clergy) to practice the ministry of healing. A very early church code lays down the prescription that each congregation must appoint at least one widow to take care of the women in the church who are sick. In the early centuries, the sacrament of unction, or anointing, was regularly practiced as a means of cure, and not as a preparation for death, as it now is in the Roman Catholic Church. Only in 852 A.D., did this sacrament become the Sacrament of Extreme Unction, administered exclusively to prepare for death.
 - e) ***“The prayer of faith,”*** spoken about in the text, does not refer to the prayer of the sick person, but to the faith of the people praying. God heals, not faith, and all prayers are subject to God’s will. James teaches that our prayers are part of God’s healing process. That is why God often waits for our prayers of faith before intervening to heal a person.
 - f) The idea is also advanced that to be effective, ***confession of sin must be made***. Christ has made it possible for us to go directly to God for forgiveness; in a sense it is much easier to confess to God than to other humans. But confessing our sins to one another has an important place in the life of the church. (1) If we have sinned against an individual, we must ask him or her to forgive us. (2) If our sin has affected the church, we must confess it publicly. (3) If we need loving support as we struggle with a sin, we should confess it to those who are able to provide that support. (4) If after confessing a private sin to God, we still don’t feel his forgiveness, we may wish to confess that sin to a fellow believer and hear from her or him assurance of God’s pardon. In Christ’s kingdom, every believer is a priest to other believers. We have a responsibility to help others come to Christ and tell them of His forgiveness.
 - g) People in the church are not alone. The members of Christ’s body should be able to count on others for support and prayer, especially when they are sick and suffering! Elders (*not just the clergy*) should be on call to respond to the illness of any member, and the church should stay alert to pray for the needs of all its sick members.
3. It was a **praying church!** The idea being that there are no limits that can be set to the power of prayer.
 - a) The Jews had a saying: “he who prays surrounds his house with a wall stronger than iron.” They went on to claim that *“penitence can do something, but prayer can do*

everything.” To the Jew, prayer was nothing less than contacting the power of God; the channel through which the strength and grace of God was brought to bear on the troubles and problems of life. (Note that Elijah’s story can be read in 1st Kings 17 & 18)

- b) A Christian’s most powerful resource is communion with God through prayer. The results are often greater than we thought were possible. Some people see prayer as a last resort to be tried when all else fails. This is backwards! Prayer should be first. Because God’s power is infinitely greater than ours, it only makes sense to rely on it – especially because God encourages us to do so.

A BREAK for DISCUSSION:

1. Do contemporary Christians embody the zeal that James’ expresses for a singing, healing and praying church?
2. Have all thoughts about “healing” as part of the church’s ministry been supplanted by the rise and advance of modern medicine?
3. What challenges have we experienced in attempting to return any of James’ ideas back into regular church life and practice?

B) THE BLESSING OF LOVE FOR ERRING BRETHREN (5:19-20)

[AMP] “[My] **brethren, if anyone among you strays from the Truth and falls into error and another [person] brings him back [to God], ²⁰ Let the [latter] one be sure that whoever turns a sinner from his evil course will save [that one’s] soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins [procure the pardon of the many sins committed by the convert].**”

[MSG] “My dear friends, if you know people who have wandered off from God’s truth, don’t write them off. Go after them. Get them back and you will have rescued precious lives from destruction and prevented an epidemic of wandering away from God.”

FACILITATOR’S COMMENTS:

1. The person who has strayed or wandered off is clearly a believer who has fallen into sin – one who is no longer living a life consistent with his/her beliefs. Christians disagree over whether or not it is possible for people to lose their salvation, but all agree that those who move away from their faith are in serious trouble and need to repent. James urges Christians to help backsliders return to God. By taking the initiative, praying for the person(s), and acting in love.
2. This passage really sets before us the great differentiating characteristic of Christian faith; it is not just intellectual, philosophical and abstract; it is always moral truth. This is a recurring theme in many N.T. expressions:
 - a) Truth is something a human being must love [2nd Thess. 2:9-10] ***“The coming of the lawless one is apparent in the working of Satan, who uses all power, signs, lying wonders, and every kind of wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved.”***
 - b) Truth is something which must be obeyed [Gal. 5:7] ***“You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth?”***
 - c) Truth is something which must be displayed in life [2nd Cor. 4:2] ***“We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God’s word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.”***
 - d) Truth is something which must be spoken in love [Eph. 4:15] ***“But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ”***
 - e) Truth is something which must be witnessed to [John 18:37] ***“Pilate asked him, ‘So you are a king?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.’”***

- f) Truth is something which must be manifested in a life of love [1st John 3:18-19] *“Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him.”*
- g) Truth is something which liberates [John 8:32] Jesus said: *“You will know the truth and the truth will make you free.”*
- h) Truth is the gift of the Holy Spirit, sent by Jesus Christ [John 16:13-15] *“When the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak of his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”*
3. At its conclusion, The Book of James emphasizes faith in action. John 3:21 reads *“Those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God,”* and it serves to fully uphold James’ point.
4. Right living is the evidence and result of faith. The church must serve with compassion, speak lovingly and truthfully, live in obedience to God’s commands, and love one another. The body of believers ought to be an example of heaven on earth, drawing people to Christ through love for God and one another. If we truly believe God’s Word we will live it 24/7. God’s Word is not merely something we read or think about, but something we do. Belief, faith, and trust must have hands and feet - - ours!

DISCUSSION:

1. Having studied THE BOOK OF JAMES, what value does it hold for modern Christians?
2. Did you find anything in JAMES which would warrant labeling it “an Epistle of Straw?”