
Wealth, Patience, and Suffering

DAVE BAST

How often would you associate these two things, wealth and misery? Not very often, would you? We are much more likely to think of wealth and happiness going together. Well, James has some very strong words of warning for wealthy people; but do not think he is only talking to the one percent. In the context of our world today where billions of people live in abject poverty, he is pretty much addressing all of us. We will listen to what he has to say, along with his final thoughts, as we close out our series on the letter of James today on Groundwork.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and finally, I guess, we have reached the end of our series on James. It has been a bit of a long haul – seven programs on five little chapters – and a lot of legal legislation almost; it is kind of a New Testament book of law. It is a book of wisdom as well. It has many practical words of advice and some pretty strong passages, too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; reading James in small bits is maybe not such a bad idea, because as we said in the first program of this series, there have been any number of people in Church history, including Martin Luther and others, who did not like James much, in no small part because he pulls no punches. James says what he thinks and if it is nuance you are looking for, if it is wiggle language or a little bit of fuzziness you are looking for, James is not your guy. He is about as blunt as a spoon and subtle as a cactus a lot of the time, and we are going to see that in this passage today from the final chapter, from James 5, where he has some very bracing things to say about money.

DAVE BAST

He sure does. Probably the strongest language of the whole letter comes in the opening verses of Chapter 5, and they are addressed point blank to rich people – to the wealthy. I tried to say this in the opening, I do not think we should immediately deflect these words off from ourselves and onto somebody who is a level or two above us socioeconomically, you know. It is easy to think: No, I am not wealthy. I mean, look at that person is wealthy. Look at the car they drive, and all that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, even in the Western world, in the United States or in Canada or parts of Europe, of course there are genuine poor people in our society; people who work very hard. They maybe work a full time job, but they are still below the poverty level; so, there certainly is genuine poverty, even in our societies; but in the context of the wider world, how many people in our world – I do not know the number, but it is hundreds of millions if not billions – live on like a dollar a day. So, for any of us who have a paycheck, who get Social Security, who have a retirement fund, we are doing all right, and these words should hit us between the eyes, too.

DAVE BAST

Well, here they are: ^{5:1}Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. ²Your wealth has rotted and moths have eaten your clothes. ³Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days.

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁴Look, the wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields, they are crying against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. ⁵You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence; you have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. ⁶You have condemned and murdered the innocent one who was not opposing you.

So, there it is.

DAVE BAST

Ouch, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; very interesting, by the way, as I read those words, and we can talk more about this. So many Old Testament allusions coming in there; particularly fairness in wages and taking care of the harvesters, you know. God has long had a concern for the poor. You had the gleaner laws in the Old Testament. You were supposed to leave something in your fields – not mow them clean – leave the edges for the poor people. Jubilee years and sharing... You have a feeling James has all of that in mind, too.

DAVE BAST

Oh, absolutely. It is a commonplace, money cannot buy happiness. Everybody repeats that. To some degree, I guess, everybody acknowledges that or recognizes it. It does not stop us all from thinking: A little bit more money would make me happy.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think we think money cannot buy happiness for *other* people, but we are pretty sure it could buy it for us.

DAVE BAST

At least it could rent it for awhile; and certainly, money can buy pleasure; so if that is what you are about, yes, by all means. There is no question that it buys... there is a temporary pleasure to it; but James is not really trying to make this philosophical point – rise above it – money cannot buy happiness – look for the things that fulfill. He is really issuing a flat out warning. It is a smack with a two-by-four right between the eyes, and what he is saying is, I think, to use an analogy, James might like to see dollar bills printed with the kind of warnings that come on cigarette packs. Warning: Money is dangerous to your spiritual health. Warning: Money can kill you eternally. It can lead to judgment and destruction.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And here is why he thinks that. He says, for one thing... There are several things going on here at once. One is: Well, if that is where you put your value in life, you have put your value in something that is temporary. Money has a way of disappearing. Stuff can rot. Even the nicest Armani suit can get threadbare...

DAVE BAST

Moth eaten, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

If you have invested your worth in stuff, well, stuff is temporary; even gold is temporary; it goes away. So, you are going to make yourself miserable if that is the standard by which you have assessed your worth and your value; but here is the other thing: The more you like that kind of money, the more money you want, and then you are going to start getting it by fleecing your workers; and you do not pay a fair wage; and you are

going to cheat people. You file a lawsuit against somebody who did not really do anything to you, but you can make a little more money; so, it is a viscous cycle, James is saying. The more you recognize that you never really quite have enough, the more you are going to try to get enough, and how are you going to get enough? Well, it would probably go beyond the regular way of just earning it. It is going to come through cutting corners, and cutting corners usually involves hurting other people and trampling on their rights and not paying a fair wage.

DAVE BAST

So, on the one hand, James warns us against giving our hearts or our lives to the pursuit of things that do not last; and in his context, of course, wealth was not necessarily measured in stock market investments, or it was not little blips on the screen – numbers on the screen that...

SCOTT HOEZEE

No, it was hard stuff.

DAVE BAST

Yes; it was physical commodities; so, it was things like clothes or land or gold and silver; and all of those things, James says, go away. Like you said, clothes can rot. They wear out.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Can you imagine what he would say if he knew that most of our wealth today is on paper?

DAVE BAST

Or on a screen.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

It is little electrons dancing around a screen and those numbers go away.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You put your money in the savings account at the bank; you think that money just sits there? No; the bank is using your money all the time. I think James would just go crazy if he could see: Wait a minute. Your wealth is not a block of gold; it is actually just a theory? That is really going to go away. That is quite an amazing thing.

DAVE BAST

So, that is point one; and then, as you said, Scott, there is this further idea James puts forward, and that is that giving ourselves to the pursuit of wealth or to the love of money can cause us to really blur the lines between right and wrong; and in God's economics, you are not justified in sharpening the pencil and improving the bottom line at the cost of the workers – of the ordinary people – of the little people. That just will not fly according to James, and according to the prophets of the Old Testament, and according to Jesus. I mean, you think of the Sermon on the Mount: Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust corrupts - that is James' point exactly – but lay up for yourself treasures in heaven.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, so where does that leave us? Does that mean nobody can have any money; do you have to live in poverty? Is that the only way to avoid this? Well, James has some further things to say in this final chapter, and we will look at that next.

BREAK:

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and we are digging into James Chapter 5 – the last of our series on the letter of James; and Scott, we have been talking about this passage where he opens the chapter by warning the wealthy, really, watch out! Money is bad for you. It is dangerous to your spiritual health, too much of it, anyway, because it is not going to last, and because it might lead you to do things that will bring God’s judgment down on you; and really, I do not think we can understand this passage at all unless we recognize that he is speaking in the context of the final judgment – of the last judgment. He is not just talking about this world. In this-worldly terms: Hey, if this is all there is, go ahead; do whatever it takes; but there is a further point that he makes when he says: Look, this is leading you to the problem of self indulgence.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, earlier we read James 5 through the sixth verse, Dave; which is all about money and not cheating people; but then, now let’s listen to the next few, picking up right at verse 7; and the first thing he says: Be patient. We do not usually associate that... So, if we were saying to somebody... If we ourselves were saying: Boy, you seem greedy, and you really seem... so, be patient.

DAVE BAST

Yes...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is not what we would tumble to...

DAVE BAST

It seems like a non sequitur, doesn’t it?

SCOTT HOEZEE

But here is what James says, following on all that talk about not being greedy and not pegging your worth to wealth, he says:

⁷Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lords’ coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains? ⁸You, too, be patient and stand firm because the Lord is coming near. ⁹Do not grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door.

DAVE BAST

And then he goes on: ¹⁰Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job’s perseverance, and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

Hey, wait a minute; I like that. There is a bit of Gospel. We have had a lot of law in James – a lot of commands, but here is a little bit of Gospel: The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes. That is about as positive as James gets. But how interesting to follow up that focus on the greedy and the wealthy with the advice to be patient; but it is not just patience in general; it is being patient, for the Lord is coming back. As you said earlier, Dave, among the things that that would imply would be that this is also going to be God’s great sorting out – God’s reckoning. Sure, for this life, cheating works. You want to get ahead, cheat.

DAVE BAST

As long as you can get away with it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, you might not get caught, but you are not going to get away with it forever, James says. Do not forget, we live in a broader context here, and within that context, we need to be patient.

DAVE BAST

Yes; it is like turning a telescope around. You know, if you look through the wrong end of a telescope, it distorts everything and you see these tiny, little figures running around and you cannot make it out; but if you turn it the right way around and look at it through that end, everything will come into focus; and James is suggesting, as do all the writers of the New Testament, that we live life consciously from the perspective of the end – the end of all things. We live in the last days according to the New Testament. The end times have already started. They began when Jesus died and rose again and promised His return, so with that in view, we can put the values of our life in order and recognize that in God's economics, people matter more than profits.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right...

DAVE BAST

P-R-O-F-I-T-S, by the way, not P-H-E-T-S.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is right; and there are two different ways... I am going to talk about this in a second. There are two different words, actually, for patience that James uses...

DAVE BAST

In this passage, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But what is interesting is that there are always two different kinds of waiting that we have in life. When we think about patience in our ordinary lives, there are two kinds of waiting. There is the kind of waiting you have to do when you are stuck in a traffic jam. It is just sort of pointless waiting. There is nothing... You know, you are just stuck; well, that is not such a happy kind of waiting; but there is also another kind of waiting, which is waiting for the airplane to come that is bringing your daughter home and you have not seen her in five years. You are waiting for something. You are not just waiting because you have not other choice and you are stuck in a traffic jam. You are waiting for something good, and that is what the New Testament always means.

DAVE BAST

Yes, or you are waiting for the birth of your child or you are a patient in the hospital. We even use the word that way.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Patient, yes.

Well, you might be very impatient, but what you are patiently waiting for is healing – is a return to health and wellbeing; and in that sense, we are called to be patient for the coming of the Lord.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is not pointless waiting; it is very, very specific waiting. So, one of the words that James uses here, especially when he uses that analogy about farmers, is a Greek word called *makrothumia*? – *makro* – macro – we have macro meaning *long*

DAVE BAST

Or big.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Big – and it means literally big suffering or really here, long suffering. It is a long suffering – you are able to endure a lot because you know something better is coming. Farmers wait patiently. They cannot make their crops grow quicker, but something good is coming, so they wait and they wait and they are patient to let things take their course.

DAVE BAST

So, patience does not mean we sit around and do not do anything – we just sit there and twiddle our thumbs. I mean, farmers – the example that he uses – they work hard. They have a lot to do, but they are patiently waiting for God to do what He has promised, which is to send to rain and to cause the sun to shine and allow the season to unfold. And the other word is even more striking about looking to what God is going to do. It is the word *hupomone*, which is a great New Testament word. It is often translated *endurance*. The writer to the Hebrews uses it that way in Chapter 12: You have need of endurance, he says. Sometimes it is translated, as here, *perseverance*. Actually, James 5:11, is where we get that old phrase: The patience of Job; and once more, we owe that to the King James translation of the Bible – the patience of Job. What the newer translations say, as the one we read – the NIV – is the *perseverance* of Job. You have heard of Job's perseverance, and have seen what the Lord finally brought about, writes James. That is the key. That is the other aspect of patience. It is hanging in there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; stick-to-itiveness.

DAVE BAST

Stick-to-itiveness, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right, which is why it is not idle – it is not twiddling your thumbs. It is perseverance. You keep on keeping on. You press ahead, doing what is right, James would say. So, again, following up on the warning to the wealthy who were doing what was wrong, James says: No, stick with doing what is right; and you know why? It might not get you ahead in this world. In fact, it might have the opposite effect. Doing the right thing... nice guys finish last... Doing the right thing sometimes means you do not get ahead, but in the long run you do because you are waiting patiently for the Lord to return, when all will be leveled, right? Misdeeds will be punished, and those who persevered – those who kept doing the good – they will see that, indeed, is the way to life, and that is the life that will be waiting for you.

DAVE BAST

You know, it makes me think of another passage from another apostle, Paul, that also uses a farming analogy for this kind of patience or perseverance, where he writes to the Galatians: Let us not grow weary in doing good, for in due season we will reap if we do not give up. That is exactly the point James wants to make. Well, there is one more point that he wants to make, and before we finish with James and Chapter 5, we will address that.

BREAK:

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and with the time that we have left, let's look at the closing verses of James 5, or a few of them anyway. James writes:

¹³Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. ¹⁴Is 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. ¹⁵And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. ¹⁶Therefore, 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.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Something appropriate about James, who has covered so much, Dave, as we have seen in this seven-part series – he has covered so much of the waterfront of life in the community, of life in the Church; he has talked about trials; he has talked about not showing favoritism; he has talked about taming the tongue and not letting our speech tear people apart. Anger and wealth and...

DAVE BAST

Taking God into account of our plans.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And at the end of the day, what it all comes to is – you know, what it is all fueled by – all of that morality – all of that righteous living for God – is couched in and motored along by prayer. What the Heidelberg Catechism and the Reformed tradition call, “The chief part of the gratitude we owe to God is prayer.” Somehow, it all flows out of and loops back to prayer. So, there is a sense in which these words about prayer clamp the whole book together in unity.

DAVE BAST

Yes; the essential part of our relationship with God, which when you stop to think about it, we have a relationship with the creator of the universe; unbelievable. And we can talk to Him at any time and at every time – in fact, that is the first point I think James tries to make here: When is the right time to pray? When is the best time to pray? Every time; all the time; no matter what. Are you sick? Pray. Are you happy? Sing songs, which is a form of prayer. Are you in trouble? Are you on top of the world? Are you down in the dumps? Pray. Pray. Pray. There is never a bad time; there is never a wrong time to pray.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes. Another way... We have already quoted a hymn or two in this show, but there is that great hymn where the hymn imagines the naysayers saying to Christians: Prayer is said in vain; and then in that hymn there is that great line where the Christian answers: Ah, no. As I breathe, I pray. And there is that idea that all of life is a prayer. All of life is an offering to God. And so, indeed, it does not matter who you are or what your circumstances, James is saying, you have just as much reason to pray if you are happy as if you are sad; if you are healthy as if you are sick; if you have enough money or you are struggling; all of it is about prayer because all of it comes from the God from whom all blessings flow.

Interesting verses here, though, too, because here again these are verses that sometimes we wonder about a little bit. I mean, is this sort of magic? James says the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective; and unfortunately, we know that in Church history and in the contemporary world that has led some people to say: Well, you did not get what you prayed for? You prayed for your Aunt Millie to get better and she died? I guess your prayer was not from a righteous person. You know, you did not do it right because James says she will be healed. So, here is one of those passages where that looks like a blank check when it comes to prayer; and it is therefore one of those passages where scripture has to interpret scripture to bring alongside this all the other passages that deal with unanswered prayer; the most famous of which, I guess, was Jesus in Gethsemane, who did not get what He prayed for.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right. Well, and James says here, in addition to that verse about a powerful and righteous person making for effective prayer, he says the prayer of faith will heal the sick; and of course, the time we are most often to pray is when we are sick – when there is some great need – and if you do not get healing, does that mean you did not pray in faith? Or do I have to believe harder in order to make my prayer work? And that can lead us

into all kinds of – just a thicket of problems, and away from the truth, I think. So, as you say, we need to interpret scripture by scripture, and our experience also by scripture. And it is good to listen. Our good friend, Todd Billings, who has appeared on this program, has just written a book about praise and lament; he has incurable cancer and he works through the Psalms and what that means. So, sometimes our praying can take the form – and needs to take the form – of lament as well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right; and also, in the 16th verse that you read a minute ago, Dave: Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. Again, you could make the conclusion there that if you are sick you must have some sins you have not confessed: Come on; come clean. Well, no. We know plenty of people who have confessed all of their sins, and they are not being punished by being sick. Our friend Todd is not being punished because of his sins, or anything. So, again, we bring in other passages and we nuance that; however, what we do not want to take away from James, by any means, is the raw power of prayer. There really is power in prayer. God does heal us through prayer. God does forgive our sins when we pray. God is attentive to us at all times, as you said, Dave, a minute ago; and when you bring this alongside some of the famous words of James' earthly brother, Jesus, we even get to call this God our Father – such intimate terms, as well as such an amazing invitation to bring all things to Him.

DAVE BAST

And you know, James urges us to pray corporately here. I think that is a great principle to take away from here. Pray with others; pray for others; he says it in just that straight forward a way; and mutual confession. Now, there is something we do not practice enough of either; but in the appropriate time and place and way, to confess to one another who and what we are; to strip away our masks, is what it amounts to; and then, to pray. We will experience, certainly, powerful healing spiritually, if not always physically.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Prayer is the one thing we do in worship every week, Dave, when we are all together that we also do privately. We do not take sermons home with us; we do not take the Sacraments home with us; but prayer is the one thing we do both corporately and privately, and what a powerful testament it is to the power of prayer in our lives.

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. We are your hosts, Dave Bast and Scott Hoezee, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So, visit our website; it is groundworkonline.com, and suggest topics and passages that we can dig into next on Groundwork.

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