

HOLY HARVESTERS

Sowing Seeds of Grace in the Hardest Soil

“A Journey Through James” Sermon 18

Text: James 5:1-11; Matthew 5:10-12; 5:38-48

James 5:1–6 *Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. ² Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. ³ 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. ⁴ Behold, the wages of the laborers 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. ⁵ You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. ⁶ You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.*

James 5:7–12 ***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. ⁸ **You also, be patient.** Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. ⁹ Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. ¹⁰ As an example of suffering and **patience**, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹ Behold, we consider those blessed who remained 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. ¹² 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.*

Matthew 5:10–12 *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

Matthew 5:38–48 *“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹ And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. ⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

Introduction:

Having exposed, confronted, and corrected the sinful double minded behavior of professing Christians in the churches to whom he writes, James now addresses those faithful believers striving to maintain a whole-hearted, single-focused, fully trusting faith in the hardest places and under the harshest of circumstances.

James began his letter by exhorting his dear readers to endure trials joyfully and allow the fiery pressure of that trial to perfect and complete their faith.

However, what do you do when the pain of the trial becomes almost unbearable? What do you do when in the course of the trial you suffer immeasurable agony, irreversible loss, and even death? And how do you respond to those who cause those losses when they are religious people who claim to worship the same God and revere the same Scripture?

In short, ***how do you sow seeds of grace in the harsh soil of unjust, heartless oppression*** by those holding all the power, and influence in the society where God has called you to display your living faith?

How do you apply wisdom from above in life circumstances where everyone else around you is operating by wisdom from below?

How do you walk faithfully when God seems silent or even absent in the face of your prolonged suffering and loss?

In short, how do the good guys live when the bad guys appear to be winning and the game looks like it is almost over?

What counsel and help does James give to God's people living in those hard places and dark spaces?

He comforts them! And this comfort is not merely kind and gracious words acknowledging that life hurts. All of us have been in excruciating moments in life where a well-meaning friend offered comfort and help, and the more they

talked, the worse you felt, or the more hopeless your circumstance appeared. Instead of giving hope, they help stifle or even kill it!

So, given all of the above, what do I mean when I say that James comforts us? Especially since that comfort comes by means of his words in this letter. To understand how James's words bring us comfort, we must answer three questions before we jump into our text this morning.

1. What exactly does James mean by "comfort"?

- The term James uses to describe this comfort is the word "**establish**" used in his exhortation to "*establish their hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.*" (5:8)
- This word means to **strengthen something from the inside** so that it is firm and will not collapse under pressure. **Illustration:** *Strengthening the inside of a can by filling it so that it can withstand heavy pressure without crumpling or being crushed. Or strengthening the components of a brick so that it does not crack or crumble when placed under extreme pressure.*
- It carries the idea of **supporting something externally** so that it is unmovable or unshakeable under opposing forces. **Illustration:** *Using strong cables to tie down and stabilize a tall radio tower to keep it from blowing down in a heavy storm or a hurricane. Or putting deep pilings and supports structures on an oil rig to stabilize it so it doesn't collapse or get blown away during a raging sea or in a typhoon.*
- This is what James is doing – he is strengthening our inner man by providing strong spiritual support so that we won't be crushed by the pressure of a trial, crumble under the weight of opposition, or get blown off course by persecution.

2. What is it about James' words in this letter that bring comfort in ways that other words do not?

- **They are God's own Words** – therefore they have unique power and ability to do things no human words can do.
- **They are true words** which means they provide wisdom from above to counter human counsel or worldly wisdom (wisdom from below).

- ***They are sound words*** – which means they are healthy or whole and thus provide spiritual health, strength, and wholeness
 - ***They are sure words*** – which means they are completely reliable and can be fully trusted and wholly depended upon.
 - David reminded us of the ***unique nature and power of these words*** in Psalm 19:1-11. He reveals *these words have power to revive our souls. They make us wise and deliver us from sinful foolishness. They bring joy to our burdened soul and afflicted heart. They bring light to our darkened eyes. They warn us from taking the wrong path. They are completely righteous and are everlasting. And in keeping them, there is great reward!*
 - No wonder they are sweeter than honey and more desirable than much fine gold (Ps 19:10)!
 - For these reasons James urges his readers to look deeply into the very words of God and do them (1:22-25).
 - Many Christians crack under pressure, crumble under the weight of opposition, or are blown off course spiritually because they do not read God's very own words regularly.
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- *Application: Some Christians are content to read the devotional thoughts others have written about God's Word but never really read the bible the way He designed it to be read – line upon line.*
 - *Let me take a moment and speak carefully and graciously but directly on this point. Devotional aids and good books about the Bible are helpful and have their place. If used discerningly, they can be of some profit. But these books and aids cannot and must not replace our reading the Bible itself, God's own words – book by book.*
 - *If I am the kind of Christian whose devotional life consists **primarily** of reading things like the Daily Bread (which has its place), I put myself in grave spiritual danger and rob myself of the very strength James is talking about.*
 - *When my devotional life consists primarily of reading aids like the Daily Bread, it is like eating spiritual trail mix without eating solid, healthy food. As with any unhealthy eating habit, a regular diet of spiritual snack food results in stunted spiritual growth and severe spiritual weakness that is unable to endure trials or resist temptation.*

- *A steady diet of spiritual snacks without regularly taking time for a full meal from God's Word will make me weak, tempt me to become spiritually lazy, make me spiritually dependent on other people's words and thoughts about God's Word, will keep me spiritually ignorant of the major themes and truths that God has placed in each book, will cause me to miss the big spiritual picture God is painting throughout the Bible, and will make me vulnerable to self-deception, false teaching, and wrong living. **In short, this approach to reading Scripture puts me in a very dangerous place spiritually.***
- *The writer of Hebrews describes Christians like this as **spiritually immature, dull of hearing, and ignorant of anything but the very basic Christian truths** because they want milk and refuse to eat meat. And as a result, **they are unskilled in the Word and are woefully lacking in spiritual discernment especially given how long they have been saved** (Heb 5:11-14).*
- *The writer of Hebrews goes on to exhort this kind of a Christian to move on from such elementary ways of reading the Bible to the actual careful and intentional study of God's Words (Heb 6:1-3), to which James adds the important exhortation to be a doer of the Word and not just a hearer (reader) only (James 1:25).*
- *So, nibble and snack on helpful and healthy spiritual snacks like the Daily Bread with a thankful heart toward those who write them– but don't let their snack (quick, easy, and tasty as it may be) replace eating the rich meal God Himself has written in the 66 books of the Bible. Determine to read them regularly and repeatedly!*

3. What is the specific comfort that James gives believers under the kind of pressure described in our text?

- Comfort that comes from the powerful promises of God that sustain us by filling us with confident hope in God
- Comfort that comes from the example of past people of God who faithful example fills us with courage for God.

And in our text, James does this in four specific ways:

I. He reminds us of the true condition and coming judgment of those who Oppress Us (5:1-6)

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you

- Whoever these rich people are, James uses biblical language and imagery associated with Divine judgment and applies it to them.
- James describes a group of people who are remarkably like the class of wicked, wealthy OT Israelites who were given over entirely to greed, self-indulgence, and the exploitation/abuse of the poor among them, and who experienced God's severe wrath.
- The same God who judged and destroyed them (*the Lord of Hosts*) is now marshaling His armies to bring the same kind of judgment and destruction upon these wicked rich people who were abusing God's faithful people in James' day.
- So who are these ruthless oppressors of God's righteous people?

A. Their Surprising Identity (5:1; 2:2-7)

- Whoever they were, we have already met them in James 2:6-7.
- They regularly attended the synagogues of their cities.
- They were wealthy and ostentatious possessing riches, fine garments, much gold and silver jewelry, and luxurious treasure (similar to the brilliant garments and the many gold rings of the rich in chapter 2).
- They were persecuting Christians in their cities by dragging them before the courts (2:6).
- They blasphemed the name of Jesus the Christ (2:7).
- Up until 70 AD, the Roman Empire permitted the Jews in their cities to administrate their own laws in their own courts and upheld their judgments with the exception of capital punishment, which had to be approved by a Roman Procurator or Governor of the city before being carried out.
- All of this seems to indicate these oppressors were wealthy, Jewish landowners familiar with Moses and the Prophets, who considered

early Jewish Christians worthy of persecution or death for following Jesus as the Messiah.

- Their wealth gave them great respect, power, and influence in their communities and among their Roman counterparts.
- But what were these wealthy Jewish landowners doing?

B. Their Wicked Activity (5:4-6)

- You have stolen what is not yours.
- You have used your stolen gains to live a self-indulgent life.
- You are living wantonly and sensually against the Law of God.
- You have condemned God's righteous people unjustly in your courts to gain what you desire.
- Your malicious oppression has impoverished God's righteous servants and you have put some of them to death unjustly.
- You have used your power and wealth to abuse and oppress God's righteous one who is powerless to resist your earthly power and worldly influence (5:6).
- ***Illustration:*** For unjust persecution and oppression (Heb 10:32-34); For ruthless opposition and unjust murder (the unjust trial and martyrdom of Stephen in Acts 6:8-7:60).

C. Their Useless Security (5:2-3)

- Your many possessions will not satisfy you.
- Your vast wealth will not sustain you.
- Your treasure will not protect you when Messiah's appears.
- Your power and influence will not save you from God who has heard the cries of two witnesses against you!
- The wages you have stolen cry out against you (5:4); and the voices of those you robbed rise up against you (5:4) and have entered into the ears of the Lord of Hosts!
- Moses said that every charge worthy of death must be established in the mouth of two credible witnesses (Dt. 17:3).
- God has heard from two such witnesses and has sentenced you to condemnation! His armies are coming against you to execute His sentence upon you!

D. Their Inescapable Doom (5:3c, 5b)

You have laid up treasure in the last days ... You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.

- The OT prophets all pointed to a time when Messiah would appear to vindicate His people and judge their enemies.
- They referred to this age as the “last days” or as “the Day of the Lord.”
- Many Israelites looked forward to this day with great anticipation. However, the OT prophets warned that for disobedient Israel, this would be a day of gloom and disaster on account of their rebellion and for the very sins these rich Jewish landowners were committing in James’ day (Is 13:6; Jer. 48:20; Ezekiel 21:12; Joel 2:1-17; Amos 6:1-14).
- And that age had dawned with the birth and ministry of Jesus the Messiah. In other words, James is reminding his readers that they are living in this amazing period of time when the Messiah would come and deliver His people and judge His enemies (Heb 11:1-2; 2 Tim 3:1).
- The Righteous One has already come, and you crucified Him and now blaspheme His holy name! However, He is also the righteous Judge who will come again in Glory and Power with His army and on that day, you will be destroyed by Him for your sins and wicked oppression of His righteous people (5:7). Behold, His coming is imminent (5:8). In fact, He is standing before the gates about to enter in power, majesty, and judgment (5:9).
- But even as their judgment draws near, there is a seed of grace sown in this hard soil by God’s righteous servants.

E. Their Merciful Opportunity (5:6c)

He does not resist you.

- But why don’t the righteous resist in the face of such oppression and injustice? Why do they go quietly, confidently, graciously, and even joyfully to the deaths you inflict on them?
- It might be that they are powerless and have no ability to resist the influence of your status and wealth.

- But there might be another, greater reason why they do not resist. Perhaps they do not resist because they love Jesus, and they love you more than their possessions or their lives!
- Jesus said that his disciples would be persecuted because of their righteousness (Matt 5:9-10). He told His followers to love their enemies and to pray for those that persecuted them (Matt 5:44). He instructed his righteous ones to *“do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who mistreat you”* (Luke 6:27-29).
- And the reason is that in so doing, these righteous persecuted followers of Jesus reflect what God Himself does toward His enemies -- *But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.* (Luke 6:35).
- And when one of these persecuted saints was being killed unjustly, he prayed for those murdering him. And God heard and answered His prayers – and not many months later, the man in charge of his execution was radically converted and became a preacher of the same gospel he murdered Stephen for proclaiming.
- That man was the Apostle Paul!

II. He exhorts us to endure faithfully by strengthening our hearts with the promise of the coming of the Lord (5:7-8)

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. ⁸ You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.

Because of the immense reward awaiting them and the amazing work of grace done through their suffering, James exhorts them to be patient as they wait for the appearance of the Lord!

A. The Exhortation – Be Patient

- The term “patient” occurs 3x in this text.
- Earlier James exhorts believers to endure trials as the means to spiritual growth, maturity, and Divine approval (1:2-4, 12).

- The term used here in these verses has a different nuance than simply persevering under pressure and opposition. It speaks to the spirit believers are to manifest as they endure.
- The term means “long-suffering” and describes active, intentional, self-restraint and graciousness believers are to exhibit in the face of severe persecution and prolonged opposition.
- And to help his readers understand what this looks like, James points them to an example.

B. The Example – Faithful Farmers

- Farmers are not passive as they wait for the early and late rains to come without which there will be no harvest.
- They plant and tend to the crop in faithful dependence on God who promised to send the needed rain at the beginning to give life to the seed and at the end to bring about a full harvest.
- Joel describes the first coming of Christ as the early rain and the 2nd Coming of Christ as the late rain (Joel 2:18-27).
- The first rain had fallen and Messiah had come. These believers were planting seeds and working the part of the field where God had placed them. And while they waited for the late rain of the 2nd Coming, they were faithfully working to prepare a harvest by displaying a whole-hearted, single-focused, fully trusting faith to those who lived in darkness.
- And to help them display this living faith faithfully and effectively, James exhorts them to strengthen and establish their hearts in order to endure trials, afflictions, and suffering with gracious, hope-filled joy!

C. The Explanation – Power in Parousia

- One writer described the idea of “*strengthen*” as “putting iron in our hearts.”
- And the iron we put in our heart is the confident expectation that what God has said in His Word about Messiah’s Appearing (Parousia) is true and will come to pass!

- This is why we must read God’s Word systematically, regularly, repeatedly, prayerfully, and submissively.
- When we read Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and the 12 Minor Prophets, they tell us that ***the Lord is Coming!***
- When we read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – these books tell us that ***the Lord has Come!***
- Paul tells us that ***we are living in the age called the “Last Days”!***
- Paul and John tell us that ***the Lord will Come Again!***
- Peter tells us ***how we are supposed to live while we wait for the day of the Lord’s Appearing.***
- And James tells us ***that day is near!***
- But if you are not reading the Bible systematically and sequentially, you will miss this amazing “iron” God has provided for the strengthening of your soul!

Which brings us to the question – what does such patient long-suffering look like in action?

III. He encourages us by the good examples set by former saints who also endured patiently and suffered well under intense pressure and unjust persecution (5:10-11)

*As an example of suffering and **patience**, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.¹¹ Behold, we consider those blessed who remained 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.*

James introduces his readers to two more friends of God who serve as examples – models and patterns – of the kind of gracious self-restraint and faithful perseverance God desires of His children when they suffer greatly. These “friends of God” were gracious in long-suffering, found strength in God’s words, and waited faithfully for God’s purposes to be fully accomplished through their ministry.

A. *The Prophets who endured unjust persecution with gracious long-suffering for God (5:10)*

- ***Jeremiah*** is an example of a servant of God who was slandered and persecuted for his preaching. He began his ministry when he was twenty and continued to faithfully preach to God's rebellious people for 40 long years.
- He was ridiculed, resisted, persecuted, mocked, thrown into a pit, and exiled for his efforts – yet he persisted. His powerful preaching was energized by prayer and bathed in tears!
- ***Isaiah*** is an example of a faithful minister who preached God's words to God's rebellious people for more than 60 years. He was violently murdered by those to whom he preached when, according to tradition, he was sawn in half at the order of King Manasseh of Judah (Heb 11:32-38).

B. *Job who endured unexplained suffering with faith-filled confidence in God (5:11)*

- James turns to the next friend of God, Job, to encourage his readers to hold fast to their faith in God's promises as they experience unexplained, prolonged suffering.
- All of James' readers were familiar with the story of this righteous man who suffered unbearable loss (wealth, children, health) and endured untrue accusations from those who sought to explain the reason for his suffering.
- In the middle of crushing physical, emotional, and relational pain, Job spoke faithfully about God to his wife, truthfully about God to his counselors, and honestly to God about his confusion in his search for wisdom.
- With every reason to abandon hope in God ("*to curse God*"), and to despair of life itself ("*and die*"), Job's faith strengthened his heart to say, "*though He slay me, yet will I trust Him.*"

Believers experiencing fierce persecution and unexplained suffering face two spiritual dangers that can do great damage to their living faith. This

is why James warns his readers against two serious sins they will face as they endure.

IV. He warns us to resist graceless behavior (toward each other) and to avoid making graceless promises (to our oppressors) when under pressure (5:9,12)

A. Warning against the sin of Graceless Behavior (5:9)

Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged

- The term “grumble” means to murmur or complain and in this context (fierce suffering), the murmuring and complaining is directed not at the oppressors but against other believers.
- This is serious because not only does it damage the credibility of our faith, such grumbling ruins the harmony/peace created by the gospel among believers as they trust God together.
- This is what Israel did during the time they were wandering in the wilderness. The book of Numbers tells their sad story. After experiencing the marvelous, gracious salvation of God from Egypt, while on their way to the land God promised to give them (with the bones of Joseph as testimony to God’s faithfulness), they grumbled and complained against each other, against Moses, and against God.
- Their grumbling occurred in the “in-between time” after God’s deliverance from Egypt while they journeyed and waited for the full fulfillment of God’s promise to bring them into the land. And they fell under judgment and did not enter the land.
- That is what James warns us against. We have seen the deliverance of God at salvation. We are on our way to Glory. Let’s not lose God’s blessing on the way because of grumbling.

B. Warning against the sin of Graceless Promises (5:12)

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.

- Not only are persecuted believers tempted to complain against each other; they might be tempted to make graceless promises to escape their persecutors.

- James is not forbidding legitimate vows (such as we make in court rooms or at weddings); nor is he forbidding the making of promises among believers.
- He is forbidding the well-established practice of making a false vow in a certain way so as to legitimize the breaking of that vow after it was made. This is what Jesus prohibited in Matthew 5:33-37).
- Someone might find himself in a situation where, by the making of a vow he might avoid certain consequences or obtain certain outcomes. And so, he would swear a false or pretend vow to convince the person to grant the desired outcome. And to justify the breaking of the vow, he would insert something into the vow that invalidated the vow to those in the know.
- For example, as a Jew, if you swore by your life, or by the temple, or by Heaven itself, then your vow was binding and could not be broken. But, if you swore by the hair on your head or chin, or by the gold in the temple then everyone in the know would immediately understand the oath you were making was invalid. However, the person receiving your oath believed your word. And when you broke your oath, you had a convenient way to explain why it was technically not lying.
- In our day, we do the same when we make promises with our fingers crossed or by pinky-promises.
- James notes that when believers make these kinds of false promises to unbelievers to avoid persecution or loss, we discredit the very gospel we proclaim and become guilty ourselves of judgment.
- Because we bear the words of God, our own words must be true lest we discredit the words of life we preach to others.

Conclusion: *Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.*

James 5:11 grabs our attention with the word “behold!” Pay attention to the two things I am about to say because they will put iron in your heart and give strength to your soul.

1. If we endure we will be blessed by God and approved before men!

- The word “*consider blessed*” means to regard or consider approved.
 - James exhorts us to strive for religion that is acceptable to God and approved before men (1:27), and this is how we develop and display that the faith we practice is both true and genuine.
2. We know and have seen the full purpose and end goal toward which God is working through His compassion and by His mercy!
- What happens to us in the years that make up the brief vapor of our life on earth (4:14) is not the end of the story, nor is it its goal.
 - God is working all things for His glory and our good in this life (Rom 8:28). And He has promised great, lasting eternal weight of glory in the life to come (2 Cor 4:17). This is why we hold fast our faith and live for eternal things seen only by the eye of faith!