James: Truth that Hurts · Sermon Twelve

Until the Lord Comes

Judgment, Patience, and the Steadfastness of the Saints

James 4:16–5:11

Good evening. We are in our series called Truth that Hurts, working verse by verse through the book of James. Last week James showed us what a life lived in humility before God looks like. The problem was never that his readers made plans. The problem was that God was nowhere in them. They decided when, where, what, and for how long, and they never once asked what the Lord wanted. So James reminded them that their lives are a mist, here for a moment and then gone, and that the humble posture of a Christian sounds like this: if the Lord wills.

Tonight we pick up with one hard sentence at the end of chapter 4. Then James turns his attention to the rich and powerful who were oppressing his people, and finally he turns back to his brothers with the word they needed most, even if it wasn't the word they wanted. So open your Bibles to James 4:16.

i.

The Sin of Knowing Better

> As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.
>
> James 4:16–17, ESV

So what is "the right thing" they know to do? In the immediate context, James has just told them. They now know the proper response: acknowledge your dependence upon God and submit your plans to His will. They can't claim ignorance anymore, and neither can we.

But James is also handing us a principle that reaches far beyond travel plans. Sin is not only doing what is wrong. It is also failing to do what you know is right. Paul works with the same idea in Romans 14. He tells the church that a believer who goes against his own conscience sins, even in a matter that is not sinful in itself, because "whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Romans 14:23). In other words, what you know

matters. Once God has shown you the right thing, you are accountable for it. You can't hear the truth, nod along, and then walk out the door as if you never heard it. Knowledge doesn't make you more spiritual. It makes you more responsible.

ii.

A Word to the Outsider

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

At first glance, this is the harshest rebuke in the whole book. The language is so intense that it makes everything James has said up to now look like child's play.

But here is something important I want you to understand. A long line of Protestant scholars and commentators, including John Calvin, Matthew Henry, and Douglas Moo, hold that this passage is not addressed to James's readers at all. It is what is called the outsider view, and I agree with it. I don't think James is rebuking his audience here, and here is why.

This rebuke is different from every other rebuke James has given so far. The others are addressed to his "brothers"; this one is not. The others are followed by a call to repent; this one is not. In verse 7 he turns back to his readers and says, "Be patient, therefore, brothers," which tells us that the verses before it describe the world his people are living in, not the people themselves. And notably, the speech shifts here and starts to sound like the Old Testament prophets.

So who is James addressing? The unbelieving world around them. And he isn't merely rebuking them; he is pronouncing judgment on them. In the Old Testament, prophets often brought rebuke and judgment against outsiders who would never read the prophecy in the first place. James is likely doing the same thing here. He is pronouncing judgment on the world system, and he is letting the people of God, broken as they are, see it.

iii.

Comfort and Warning

Why would James do that? To comfort them. And he does it in three ways.

First, by promising judgment on those who afflict them. Maybe someone has wronged you. Maybe they used you, cheated you, lied about you, and as far as you can tell they got away with it. They didn't. The cries of the harvesters reached the ears of the Lord of hosts, and so have yours. You don't have to carry the job of settling the score, because God has promised to carry it.

Second, by showing the difference between a Christian who has lost his way and a wicked pagan. It is really important to James that his people realize this. Even though he has just used harsh language to describe them and the state of their own souls, they are different from the world around them. And that is a helpful word for everyone in the room today. It has been a convicting several weeks as we've worked through James, and he has had some hard and strong words for us. But you need to know there is a difference between a double minded Christian and the world. A Christian who has lost ground in their own soul is not the same as a wicked, godless pagan. James wants his audience to see that, and God wants *you* to see that. At the same time, this passage may be acting as a warning, a picture of what we could become if our compromise is left unchecked.

Third, by validating that the trial is real. James started his letter by addressing the trials his people were walking through. Here you get the full picture of what they were living in. He doesn't minimize it. He doesn't tell them it's not that bad. He calls it what it is: it's hard, because the people pressing on them are wicked.

So let's look for a moment at those sins and take them as a final warning for ourselves. These people were hoarding wealth and storing up treasure. They were withholding wages and defrauding their workers. They were living in luxury and self-indulgence, fattening themselves for judgment. They were condemning and murdering the righteous, oppressing people who did not resist them. None of that starts overnight. It starts small, in a heart that loves comfort more than it loves God and neighbor.

iv.

Patient Until He Comes

> 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. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.
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> James 5:7–8, ESV

In light of the moment they are in (suffering, persecution, oppression), James's answer is to be patient. I think this is really interesting, because it highlights a theme that runs all through the New Testament. In the midst of oppression, James's answer isn't to fight fire with fire. It isn't to overthrow the oppressors. It isn't a rebellion or a revolution. It's patience.

That can be a hard pill to swallow. John MacArthur explains this well. As Christians we have no license to take up arms and overthrow our oppressors. We may dissent, but we cannot rebel. In other words, we can hide, we can run, we can refuse to comply, but we accept the consequences that come with it. Whenever the New Testament addresses the suffering believer, the answer is always the same: be patient, endure, don't give up on Jesus, and don't repay evil for evil.

And I get that this isn't the message we want. We want James to say, "Don't worry, breakthrough is coming. Deliverance is coming. Change is coming. Keep doing what's right and your life will turn around." He doesn't say that. He doesn't promise it, because he is honest. It might happen. It just as easily might not.

There is a paradigm in the Western church that needs to be addressed: the idea that good things happen to the faithful. Guys, good things don't always happen to good Christians. Sometimes they do, but they are not guaranteed. Being a good Christian doesn't always get you the house, the job, the promotion, the influence, or the breakthrough. I get so frustrated when I hear preachers promise revival, breakthrough, healing, and finances when the Bible doesn't promise those things. What it does promise is trial, tribulation, and suffering, along with joy in the midst of it, peace, grace, the salvation of our souls, an Advocate, a friend who sticks closer than a brother, and eternal rewards for the faithful. Good things might happen. You might get the job. But it isn't the hard and fast rule we think it is. Just go ask the Christians in Somalia whether their faithfulness is producing all these amazing things in their lives.

Before You Turn the Page

Be honest with yourself. Have you been following Jesus with a quiet expectation that He owes you something for it? A better job, an easier season, a marriage that finally gets fixed, a breakthrough you can point to? What happens to your faith when that doesn't come? James isn't asking you to stop hoping. He is asking you to put your hope in the right place.

Because notice what James says. Be patient. Not until the tides of revival sweep the land. Not until you see your breakthrough. Not until the Lord removes your oppressors. Be patient until the coming of the Lord. That's when the breakthrough is guaranteed. That's when deliverance comes in full. Which implies that the suffering won't fully end until that day. There may be seasons when it lets up, moments of calm, but the rescue we are waiting for is His return.

We need to realize that the coming of the Lord is the hope of the believer. One day He will come back in such a glorious, powerful, tangible, unmistakable way. It will be the ultimate rescue, the day our hope becomes our reality. And in that moment, all the pain, all the suffering, and all the confusion will be worth it.

The hope isn't that things get better or get easier.
Our hope is the coming of the Lord.

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v.

The Steadfastness of the Saints

> Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. 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.
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> James 5:9–11, ESV

Once again James emphasizes how we treat one another when we are under trial. Suffering has a way of turning God's people on each other, and James won't allow it. And once again he ties it to the coming of the Lord: the Judge is standing at the door.

Then he gives us encouragement from the Old Testament, which to James was simply the Scriptures. We should take comfort in our afflictions by looking at the lives of the prophets and Job. So let's do a quick rundown.

Isaiah spent his ministry preaching to a people God warned would largely refuse to listen, and according to ancient Jewish tradition he was eventually martyred by being sawn in two. Jeremiah was mocked, threatened, beaten, put in stocks, imprisoned, and thrown into a muddy cistern to die because he refused to stop preaching what God had given him. Ezekiel ministered among the exiles in Babylon under extremely difficult circumstances, and God told him his wife would suddenly die and that he was to keep prophesying through the loss. Daniel was taken from his homeland into captivity as a young man and pressured to conform to a pagan empire, and when he refused to stop praying to God, he was thrown into a den of lions. Hosea was called to live through the humiliation and heartbreak of an unfaithful marriage, so that his own family became a living picture of Israel's unfaithfulness to God. Amos confronted Israel's corruption and injustice and was

opposed by the religious establishment; Amaziah the priest essentially told him to leave and stop preaching there.

And then there is Job. He lost his wealth, his servants, all ten of his children, and finally his health. His wife told him to curse God and die. His friends accused him of deserving his suffering. And yet through grief, confusion, and questions, Job continued to cling to God. And James says you have seen the purpose of the Lord in it: He is compassionate and merciful.

Until He Comes

Be Patient › Establish Your Hearts › Do Not Grumble › Remain Steadfast

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The idea is simple. The prophets and Job were faithful, and terrible things happened to them anyway. That is not a sign that God had forgotten them. It is the path the faithful have always walked, and they walked it all the way home.

They were faithful, and bad things happened to them.
Yet they didn't lose faith, and they didn't lose heart.

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Soli Deo Gloria

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