

Chapter Five

commentary

The chapter break in our text is somewhat unfortunate, for it is clear that James is continuing on with the same subject with which he began in 4:13, namely, the lure of materialism which can detract believers from that which is foundational, that is, living for the glory of God and therefore having a life of service to other believers, whether wealthy or poor. For if one is wealthy, this gives ample opportunities to help fellow believers who are in need. Rather than being a source of pride, the wealthy within the body of Messiah have been given the ability to help others and in doing so, to demonstrate their dependence upon God and not upon their current economic status within society.

While it seems quite clear that the previous verses (4:13–17) are addressed to individuals within the believing community, the tone and words of James are quite different in our current context (5:1–6). In the previous verses James is warning those within the believing community who were merchants and rightly intent upon being diligent in regard to their businesses, to fully affirm that their success is the gift of God's grace and not something they have established in their own power or acumen. For life "is a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (4:14). Rather than being lured into the false security which wealth can bring, James admonishes even those believers who were well-to-do, to recognize that everything they have gained is a gift from God as a result of His divine will and grace and therefore He should receive all of the glory. What therefore should dominate the thinking of every believer, regardless of their economic status is, "If the Lord wills, we will also do this or that" (v. 15). Having the proper perspective regarding one's station in life is therefore one of humility and thanksgiving toward God, for it is always by His grace and power that "we live and move and exist" (Acts 17:28).

But when we come to our current text in chapter five, we see a marked change in James' perspective and words. In the previous context he addresses his readers as "brethren" (3:1, 10, 12; 4:11), and exhorts them to live in accordance with who they are as believers in Yeshua, obeying the Torah of God and helping each other rather than judging one another. Yet in the opening section of our chapter (vs. 1–6) he describes those he addresses as those who should "weep and howl for the miseries which are about to come upon them" (v. 1), for they have treated their workers unfairly, robbing them of rightful wages. In addition,

their lives are marked by “wanton pleasure” (v. 5). It seems clear, then, that James is addressing unbelievers and not merely believers who are being admonished to correct their sinful ways.

But given the fact that James seems clearly to be addressing unbelievers, the obvious question that arises is how he would envision such unbelievers to hear his words of warning. Several answers present themselves to this question. First, it is possible that there were numbers of unbelievers who attended the gatherings of the believing community.¹ That the prophets, speaking to Israel, addressed those who were disobedient to God’s commandments is evident, for disobedient Israelites acted and lived as *idolators*.² These could have been those who were wealthy merchants and were employing believers in Yeshua in their respective businesses. Or they could have been some who attended the non-believing synagogues but were attending the “synagogue of the way” hoping to find workers for their respective enterprises.

Secondly, it is also possible that James addresses unbelievers in these opening verses of our chapter in order to show the characteristics of those who had gained their wealth through less than righteous means, and who showed forth the reality of their hearts by the way they cheated their workers in order to increase their own wealth. As such, he is admonishing those true believers who made up the believing community to understand the true end of those who depend upon their own wealth and have no regard at all for how they will fare when standing before the Lord in the day of judgment.

And it seems to me this is the better interpretation of why James is addressing the wealthy unbeliever, for in doing so he is warning the followers of Yeshua not to allow material wealth to captivate their desires but rather that they would seek to live obedient lives, trusting God to supply their needs as they continued to live in obedience to His word. Calvin, understanding James to be addressing unbelievers in this context, puts it this way:

They are mistaken, as I think, who consider that James here exhorts the rich to repentance. It seems to me to be a simple denunciation of God’s judgment, by which he meant to terrify them without giving them any hope of pardon; for all

1 Cf. 1:10;

2 Cf. Isaiah 1, the entire chapter characterizes Israel, the chosen people, as having forsaken the Lord for lifeless idols. Surely there was always a remnant in Israel who had genuine faith in the Lord, but the majority of the nation as Isaiah addresses them, are blatant unbelievers.

that he says tends only to despair. He, therefore, does not address them in order to invite them to repentance; but, on the contrary, he has a regard to the faithful, that they, hearing of the miserable end of the rich, might not envy their fortune, and also that knowing that God would be the avenger of the wrongs they suffered, they might with a calm and resigned mind bear them.¹

1 – Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you.

We encountered the same opening words, “Come now” (ἄγε νῦν, *age nun*) in 4:13, in which James elicits the attention of the believers he is addressing. Here, in our text, James likewise calls his readers to pay special attention to this words, for he intends them to understand the futility of depending upon one’s earthly possessions as though these could secure one’s right standing before God as well as one’s eternal life.

weep and howl – “Weeping” is used by the prophets to describe the remorse that comes upon a person in the midst of tragedy (Isa 15:2–3; Jer 9:1; 13:17; La 1:1–2). Yeshua uses the same term in beatitudes as recorded by Luke:

Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied.
 Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. (Lk 6:21–22)

Here, once again, Yeshua is not teaching that it is wrong to be well-fed or to laugh. His words relate to those who live with the idea that their current experience of pleasure and wealth is the goal of their lives, and will secure them a blessed future.

The Greek word translated “howl” is ὀλολύζω (*ololuzō*) and could just as well be translated as “moaning,” for the Greek word is onomatopoeic—it mimics the sound of someone who is moaning. The word is used only here in the Apostolic Scriptures but it is found 21 times in the Lxx, often translated by the verb “to wail” in our English Bibles, and describes situations of dire need and despair. It is found only in the

1 Calvin, *James*, p. 342.

Prophets in the Tanach and always in the context of divine judgment. That the background of James' words is obviously the message of the Prophets in the Tanach, supports the fact that James is referring to the final day of judgment.

This background makes clear that the misery that is coming upon the rich refers not to earthly, temporal suffering, but to the condemnation and punishment that God will mete out to them on the day of judgment.¹

In fact, the word translated "misery" is plural in the Greek (*ταλαιπωρίας* < *ταλαιπωρί*, *palaiḗri*), as the NASB correctly translates it, giving the picture of not just one cause of misery but many, indicating "misery upon misery."

Being spiritually anesthesized by their wealthy and self-fulfilled lives, those who think they are secure in their earthly wealth and possessions have no concern for their eternal future.

2-3 Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure!

"Riches" translates the Greek *πλοῦτος* (*ploutos*) which carries the sense of any sort of wealth or treasure. Obviously, the tendency of wealth or treasures is to offer false security to its owner, and this is the very point James emphasizes. For those things which are deemed as treasures in this world are subject to the same temporality of all material things in our world.

How is it that "riches" are subject to "rot?" Some have suggested that James has "perishable goods" in mind in this verse as comprising the "riches" upon which some of the wealthy depend. This could be such things as grain stored up from the previous harvest. This, of course, may surely be understood by the term James uses. But the Greek word "rotted" (*σῆπω*, *sāpō*) can also be used metaphorically to refer to anything that can lose its value, be lost, or stolen. But to state that riches can rot leads forward to the next illustration, that of garments being moth-eaten.

Once again, it appears that James may well have the words of Yesh-

1 Douglas Mood, *James*, p. 211.

ua in mind as he gives us this exhortation.

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; (Matt 6:19–20, cf. Lk 12:23)

That the small insignificant moth can ruin fabrics shows the instability of the fine garments the wealthy wear to identify themselves as having the kind of financial success that alludes the common person.

...*Your gold and your silver have rusted* – That James writes of “riches rotting” could have been mentally countered by some who may have retorted, “Oh, but I have my wealth in silver and gold!” But interestingly James attributes the diminishing of the value of gold and silver by corrosion as well. However, we know that these precious metals are not actually subject to “rust” or “corrosion.”¹ Thus it is most likely that we should understand the use of the Greek word *κατιόω* (*katioō*), “to become rusty, tarnished, corroded,”² in a metaphoric sense, that is, even precious metals can lose their value, and when they do, they cease to be viable currency to purchase anything. What is more, precious metals are a prime target of thieves. The picture James presents is one of poverty because what was counted upon as having enduring and unchallenged wealth has ceased to have sustainable value or has been entirely lost.

...*and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire* – In what way will the “corrosion,” that is, the loss of value of these precious metals, be a witness against the wealthy? The witness is simply that while being careful and prudent with the good things God has given, one must never put their hope and trust in wealth and material goods. For when one’s hope and trust is in those things considered to be valuable, and when these are gone, the falsehood of trusting and relying upon one’s wealth is fully exposed.

...*It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure!* – The phrase “in the last days” (*ἐν ἑσχάταις ἡμέραις*) could be understood a number of ways. It is clear that there is no definite article, so the NASB “in the last days” would be translated “in last days,” meaning, in the last days of a person’s life, or as a person grows older and is no longer able to work

1 Interestingly, in the deuterocanonical *Epistle of Jeremiah* 11 and 23, it is said of silver, golden, and wooden gods that they “cannot save themselves from rust and moths.”

2 BDAG, “κατιόω,” p. 534.

and gain riches as he or she did in their younger years. The phrase could also be understood as *“It is for the last days that you have stored up your treasure,”* giving the picture of storing up wealth to sustain oneself and in doing so, to be less than generous to those who are currently in need. Or, for those who employ workers, to pay them less than promised in order to amass wealth for oneself.

James speaks of those who are depending upon their wealth to secure their future as being destroyed by their wealth. But it is not the wealth itself that brings destruction but trusting in one’s wealth is the fire which consumes one’s flesh. This is James’ point. He is not teaching us here to be undisciplined with the material things with which we have been entrusted. But his main point is to warn us with these strong words about the subtle yet powerful draw that wealth has upon a person, drawing them to trust in something that could be lost in a moment and at the same time turning their hearts from a fervent and enduring trust in God’s promise to meet all the needs of His beloved children.

Trusting in wealth because it supposedly “retains its value” is trusting in a charade. The rituals of amassing wealth and curating precious objects are really a dance of death. Trusting in wealth is then a damaging and degrading attitude.¹

Once again, it is clear that James is not teaching us against being wealthy or possessing material goods and monetary substance. He is teaching us that even when we are blessed with bountiful sustenance, we must still recognize and fully believe that every good thing we have is a gift of God and that such blessings must be used for His glory and not become the object of our hope and trust. Surely our trust and hope is in God and in God alone. He alone is our Savior and our lives are fully and wonderfully in His hands.

And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Messiah Yeshua. (Phil 4:19)

4 – Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.

We are minded here that James is most likely referring to unbeliev-

1 Richardson, *James*, p. 206

ers who are land owners and who employ common laborers to work in the fields and to harvest the crops. The unrighteous actions of these wealthy land owners is that they withhold pay for those who have labored, and because of the high positions the wealthy possess within the society, seeking to bring them to justice is impossible for the laborer. Thus, the very wages they withhold and remain in their own possession are a witness against them. James uses the metaphor of the wages themselves “crying out against” those who have stolen the earnings of their own laborers.

We are reminded of the Torah laws relating to those who are hired to do work:

You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your countrymen or one of your aliens who is in your land in your towns. You shall give him his wages on his day before the sun sets, for he is poor and sets his heart on it; so that he will not cry against you to the LORD and it become sin in you. (Deut 24:14–15)

Thus, God is the One Who upholds His righteous commandments and it is to Him that the unfair employer will give account. Indeed, there is One from Whom nothing is hidden! Speaking of those who persecute the followers of Yeshua, our Lord taught:

Therefore do not fear them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. (Matt 10:26)

...and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. – Here we see once again that our God knows all things, and that by His sovereign power will bring to justice all stand as unredeemed sinners before Him. When His children cry out to Him, He hears and acts on their behalf.

The Greek phrase *κυρίου σαβαωθ* is a translation of קדוש קדוש קדוש יהוה צבאות “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts” (Is 6:3). The Hebrew word צבאות (*tzava’ot*) means “armies,” “troops,” etc. Thus, when the cries and prayers ascend to the Father, He hears and acts on behalf of His people. Here we see the clear exhortation James is giving: as children of the Lord, we must not trust in our earthly riches, but entrust ourselves to God and use what He has given us for His glory.