

Getting Perspective

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[0 : 00] Well, it was after morning church one Sunday, around lunchtime, I was walking home. We live just next door, so it's a long way home.

And I was leaving just the front of the church, at the front of you, down the driveway, when I heard this almighty scream come from my house.

And I knew whose scream it belonged to. It was my youngest daughter. And so loud was that scream that I felt sick, and I quickly ran inside, and I saw my youngest in tears, and I quickly asked my wife, what happened? What happened? Has she hurt herself?

Has her brother hurt her? What happened? Well, said Michelle, her headband wouldn't stay on her head properly. That was it. Now, I hate it when my headbands don't stay on my head properly.

But I tried to explain that you don't need to carry on like that and scream at the top of your voice. Now, I know I'm a boy, and I don't understand fashion, but she didn't quite have things in perspective, did she?

[1 : 08] As parents, we often have to teach our children to put things into perspective. But it's not just children who need to be taught about getting perspective. James' readers need it too, and we do as well from time to time.

You see, the next part of James' letter here, he addresses three different groups of people, it seems. And he has something to say to each group about getting a part of their life into perspective.

If you've got your Bibles there, it would be really helpful. If not, please open to James chapter 5, page 1219. And have a look at there.

The first group is chapter 4, verse 13. James writes, Now listen, you who say, today or tomorrow will do this or that. So that's the first group. Those who make plans, who seem to be wealthy enough Christians to go to this city or that city.

So it seems to be wealthy Christians. And then in chapter 5, verse 1, he says, Now listen, you rich people. So it's another group of people, but who are also rich. But this time, I think they're actually non-Christians.

[2 : 12] And I'll explain a bit more about that later. And then the third group is in chapter 5, verse 7. He then says, This group are obviously Christians, but they seem to be poor and suffering.

And perhaps they were the ones who were envying and quarrelling, like we heard last week in chapter 4. But the point is, there are three groups of people that James seems to address tonight.

And as I said, he tells them, each group, how to get a part of their life into perspective. And as he does that, he teaches us about God's perspective in life in these areas.

And those three areas are plans, prosperity, and pain. I'll start with the letter P. I hope you appreciate that. I worked hard on that. So we're at point 1, firstly, plans.

Verse 13. He writes, Now listen, you who say, today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business, and make money.

[3 : 13] James starts off here with the words, Now listen, which suggests he has something pretty important to say to these planners. But I want to ask, what's the problem? I mean, we all make plans, don't we?

We all think about where we'll go on holidays, whether it's this city or that city, what careers or jobs we'll try and get, and therefore what university degrees we might undertake, what we might save up and spend our money on.

In fact, there is a sense in which we should plan. Otherwise, we'll just meander on through life and not making the most of the gifts or the resources that God has given us.

So why is James so serious here? Well, because these plans are presumptuous and arrogant. Have a look at verse 14. Chapter 4, verse 14.

He says, Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. And verse 16, he says, As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes.

[4 : 16] And all such boasting is evil. See, James is not against their plans to make money or to travel per se. He's against the arrogant attitude behind the plans, you see.

They are boasting about their plans in a way that assumes that they are in control. That they can do whatever they like, that they know what's going to happen. But James says in verse 14, Get some perspective.

First of all, you don't even know what's going to happen tomorrow. We know that ourselves, don't we? We don't know the future and we're certainly not in control of the future, are we? Two weeks ago, a member from our morning congregation was on his way to church when a lady ran a red light and took out his car.

He and his two boys were safe in God's kindness. But he said to me on the phone that afternoon, When I got up this morning, I was not expecting this to happen. Of course not.

You don't expect these things. Because the other reason, we don't even know that these things are going to happen. We don't know what's going to happen for the rest of the day or rest of the tonight, let alone what's going to happen tomorrow or in a week's time or a month's time.

[5 : 24] And what's more, even if we did know, we could not control those things. And we're not in control, but God is. On the next slide is a verse from Proverbs 19.

And it says this, Many are the plans in the mind of a man or a woman, but it is the Lord's purpose that will stand. You see, we may plan, but it's only God's purposes that will stand in the end.

In other words, only God can make his plans come to fruition every time because only God is in control. He knows what will happen tomorrow because he's in control of tomorrow.

And so to boast in our plans is a bit silly because we don't even know what will happen tomorrow, let alone a week or a month's time. What's more, it's to pretend we are like God who actually does know and is in control.

And so James says in verse 14, Who do you think you are? Compared to God, you're nothing but a mist. Here today, gone tomorrow. Get some perspective, he says. And instead of boasting arrogantly, plan with humility.

[6 : 28] See verse 15? He says in verse 15, Instead, you ought to say, If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.

Now the word humility is not there in verse 15, but the idea is. When we make plans, we are to humbly acknowledge that God is in control. That if it's the Lord's will, we will do this or do that.

Now I don't think James is suggesting we have to literally tack on the words, if it is the Lord's will to every sentence. I might have some dinner later tonight, if it's the Lord's will. Or I might go and visit so-and-so next week, if it's the Lord's will.

I mean, it's not a bad thing to say, but I don't think that's his point. His point, I think, is about having the attitude behind the words. Instead of having an attitude of arrogance that thinks we are in control, we'd have an attitude of humility that knows God is in control.

After all, we saw last week that humility is a key aspect to wisdom, to living well. And so that means we'll humbly pray about our plans, acknowledging that God knows all and is in control of all.

[7 : 35] But it also means we'll trust God, even when his plan means something different to our plans, because that's when it really is hard. We won't think that we know better than God.

God said we'll humbly trust him, even if we don't understand his plan for us. There was a married couple from one of my old churches who planned, their plan was to have four children.

When she became pregnant, they found out she had twins halfway there. But it wasn't quite what they were planning to at once. Anyway, they were happy enough. But then they found out that not one, but both of them had severe autism.

Now, that certainly was not what they had planned for. And so they had to change their plan from four kids to two, because these two were going to demand all their energy and time and caring for them.

Yet when you met them, they were still committed Christians who joyfully, joyfully continued to trust God with humility, even though they didn't understand why God let this happen to them.

[8 : 42] How can they do that? Well, because they know God's plans also included giving up his son for them. They know that God's plans includes working for their good.

They know that God's plan is based on God's wisdom and his good character. And they know God's plan is to restore their children with perfect bodies on the last day. And so they humbly trust him.

When we make plans, we need to do so with the right perspective. One that humbly acknowledges God is God and trusts him completely. In fact, not to do so is actually sin.

Did you realize? See verse 17? It says, if anyone then knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them. You see, sin is not just about doing the things we should not do, but it's also not doing the things we should do, like humbly trusting God.

Well, that's the first group, those planners. The second group that James says needs some perspective are the rich people. And to feel the full weight of what James says to these people here, I'm going to read out the whole section, chapter 5, verses 1 to 6.

[9 : 53] So follow along in your Bibles. Chapter 5, verse 1, he says, Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you.

Your wealth has rotten and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days.

Look, the wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence.

You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the innocent one who is not opposing you. It's pretty full-on language, isn't it?

And so the first question you might be wondering is, who are these rich people? Because I sure hope it's not me. Well, as I said at the start, I think they're rich non-Christians who are exploiting James' readers.

[10 : 58] Now, why do I think that? Well, because James does not seem to treat them as a Christian. For example, he doesn't give them any commands to act Christianly, like he just did to those planners. He said to the planners, don't do this, but say it's the Lord's will.

Or, you know, this is how you live Christianly. But there's nothing like that here. It's just judgment. What's more, their judgment seems to be pretty bad. So verse 3, the corrosion of their wealth will eat their flesh like fire.

Or verse 5, they have fattened themselves for the day of slaughter. And so it's a pretty negative picture of what will happen to them on judgment day. It's not one of someone escaping, a Christian escaping through the flames, so to speak.

And so I suspect James is writing to rich people who are not Christians. But if this bit is addressed to non-Christians, then why does James put it in a letter to Christians?

Well, it could be that some of the rich unbelievers actually came to church occasionally. In chapter 2, verse 6, some rich people did come to church, we know. Do you remember?

[11 : 59] And James' readers showed favoritism to them, even though those rich people were exploiting them and blaspheming the name of Jesus. Chapter 2, verse 6. And so if they did occasionally come to church and they heard this part of James' letter, then, you know, hopefully they would have repented.

But I suspect James is doing what the Old Testament prophets often did. The Old Testament prophets would stand in front of Israel and they would say, Woe to you, Assyria.

So they would announce judgment to Israel about another nation. Why would they do that? Well, for two reasons. First, so that Israel could take comfort in the fact that those other nations who oppress them will be held accountable.

And so for James' readers, as he announces judgment on the rich non-Christians who oppress them, he is saying to his suffering readers, Don't worry about these people who mistreat you, who exploit you.

God will hold them accountable. He will judge them. And this makes sense of verses 7 and 8, where James tells his readers, Be patient, therefore, because the Lord's coming is near, which means judgment for those rich oppressors.

[13 : 11] But the second reason the Old Testament prophets told Israel about judgment of other nations was to warn Israel not to be like the other nations. And so too for James.

As he announces judgment on these rich who are mistreating them, it also acts as a warning to his readers not to be like these people. Rather, to have God's perspective.

On prosperity. You see, these rich people are judged for doing four things. In verse 4, they are judged for exploiting workers. In verse 5, they are judged for being self-indulgent.

In verse 6, they are judged for killing and condemning innocent people, presumably by withholding wages so that the workers starve to death. And this is what the love of money has led them to.

But the fourth thing they are judged for is the one I want to focus on for a moment. And it's there in verses 2 and 3. Do you see there? Verse 2, James says, Your wealth has rotted and moths have eaten your clothes.

[14 : 11] Your gold and silver are corroded and their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in these last days. The last days here refers to the time when Jesus rose and when Jesus will return.

We're in the last days now. And for these people, it seems as though they weren't using their wealth appropriately in the last days.

How? Well, they were hoarding their wealth or literally storing up treasures on earth, which kind of sounds like something Jesus said not to do, doesn't it? For when Jesus returns, their wealth will be of no help to them.

In fact, it will testify against them, James says. Notice verse 3. Their corrosion will testify against you. How? Well, gold and silver don't corrode as such, I believe.

We have a scientist here. I'll have to ask him afterwards. But corrosion usually occurs because of a lack of use and care over time. And so I think James means that the lack of use of their money for good will testify against them.

[15 : 22] You see, instead of using money to help others and so on, it's as though their money just sat there gathering dust, corroding. Instead of being generous, they have hoarded. And it's this lack of generosity that will testify against them.

It's this lack of godly use of their resources that will stand against them. Now, it's important to notice here that James is not against being rich per se. Otherwise, most of us in Australia would be in trouble because we are rich compared to a lot of the world.

Even if you're at uni and you don't have a job and you don't have much money in the bank, we are rich compared to many people in the world. Rather, in this particular example, he's against the love of money and the lack of generosity.

Now, of course, we need to be wise and we need to plan and we need to save. In fact, we're told in the Bible that we are to save up for what we need so that when we grow up, we won't be a burden on children, our own children or others.

But we need to watch that our saving doesn't become hoarding. And the way to tell is to ask ourselves, are we still being generous? Are we trusting God or the money under the mattress, so to speak?

[16 : 34] Now, I know not many of you necessarily have full-time jobs, but if you don't get this attitude right now, it's actually harder to get right later when you do have a full-time job.

So we need to hear this. We need to heed the words, not just of James, but of Jesus on the next slide. Remember Jesus said, 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 by being generous towards God's work and people.

That's what Jesus is saying. That's the perspective we're to have. It doesn't matter how much money we have, we need to have that attitude. I remember one time at another church, we were planning an event and we needed some money for this evangelistic event.

And very casually, this guy, this single guy piped up and he said, I've got \$1,000 burning a hole in my wallet. You can have that. And now the amount is irrelevant.

It could have been \$10 or whatever. It's irrelevant. It was the attitude that I was encouraged by. He was a guy who didn't love money so much that he hoarded it or overindulged, but rather he was generous with it and eager to use what God had given him for God's glory.

[17 : 51] In other words, he was a guy who had God's perspective on prosperity. And it's a perspective that I know many here do have, which is terrific. But it's a perspective that we all need to have.

Well, the final group that James addresses are the Christians who were suffering. And James seeks to encourage them by putting their pain in perspective, point three. So have a look there in your Bibles at verse seven.

James writes, The first thing that James says to those Christians who are suffering is to be patient because the Lord Jesus' return is near.

It's the very next thing, the very next big thing on God's agenda is to send his son to return. And this means judgment for those rich who are oppressing his readers, but it also means salvation for those who trust Jesus.

And no more tears, no more pain, no more death. Just the fullness of God's blessings. Of course, when we think of Jesus' return, we kind of think it's taking a long time, don't we?

[19 : 13] After all, it's been 2,000 years. But we need to remember what Peter says, that God is actually being patient with people, giving more people a chance to turn to Jesus and be saved.

That's why he hasn't sent Jesus yet. He's giving people more opportunities to be part of God's kingdom. And so, just as God is patient with people, we need to be patient in our situations.

As a farmer has to be patient for rain and crops, so too do we need to be patient for Jesus to return, to put this fallen world right, and give us complete freedom from our pain and suffering.

But not only are we too patient, but James says we're to stand firm, or literally establish your hearts, is what he says. That is, even in pain, we must wholeheartedly keep trusting God.

That Jesus will return. That God does have our good in mind. That he will put all things right, and it will be all worth it. Of course, standing firm and having patience is easier said than done, isn't it?

[20 : 18] Especially in our world where everything is so instant. In fact, I once heard a minister say, I used to pray for patience, but then I stopped because God was taking too long to answer.

It was a joke. Do you get it? No? Oh. But we find it hard to be patient, don't we? We don't like having to wait in doctor's surgeries, or shopping queues, or traffic jams.

And sometimes we find it hard to wait for God's answer to our prayers. Instead, we're much more prone to grumbling about the situation. Can't believe this traffic. Why hasn't God given me what I want?

I've prayed a hundred times for it. And so on. When our patience is tested, when we're under pressure, or when we're stressed, we often grumble against one another, particularly the people closest to us.

Indeed, we saw this last week with James' readers who were fighting and quarrelling amongst themselves. Because instead of being patient, they envied and wanted things they didn't have. And so James says, we should not only be patient and stand firm, but verse 9, don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you'll be judged.

[21 : 26] The judge is standing at the door. You see, James has already said that Jesus is about to return. He's at the door. It's the next big thing on God's agenda. And it means that all those who are oppressed will give an account.

And it means we'll be brought into the glorious salvation that we've been promised. But it also means we will have to give an account of the way we've behaved as well. That's what Paul says.

He says, all must appear before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account of the things done while in the body. And so he says, James, watch what you say, even in suffering. And this also means telling the truth.

See verse 12. He says, above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear, not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple yes or no. Otherwise, you will be condemned.

You see, James's readers are suffering. And there was a practice of the Pharisees who used to swear by different things to fudge the truth. And so we read an account in Matthew chapter 23, where the Pharisee tells people, or Jesus has a go at the Pharisees for saying, look, if you swear by the temple, you don't have to keep your word.

[22 : 38] But if you swear by the gold in the temple, then you have to keep your word. And so they had this system of fudging the truth. And James is saying, you don't need to swear by anything. Just tell the truth.

When you're suffering, I know you might be tempted to fudge the truth. Oh, look, you owe me six shekels. I swear by the temple. You owe me six. When really, you only owe you four. But when you're suffering, you might be tempted to fudge the truth.

You see, not only grumble, but bend the truth to get ahead. And James is saying, don't do that. Be patient. Stand firm. Don't grumble. And keep telling the truth.

And notice there is no hint at this point that their pain will stop before Jesus returns. Did you notice that? And so to encourage them to keep persevering to the end, James gives them and us a couple of examples.

See verse 10. He says, brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered.

[23 : 39] You've heard of Job's perseverance and of seeing what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy. He says, James says, James says, look at the prophets. They persevered in trusting God, speaking God's word to the people, even though they were persecuted and suffered for it.

Or take Job. Most of us know the story of Job. He persevered in great suffering. And in the end, received double of everything he had in the first place.

Or as Paul puts it on a couple of slides. It's the next slide. Next one. Keep going. There we are. Remember what Paul says.

He says, look, I consider my present sufferings not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us. And so we've got all these examples to keep spurring us on despite pain and suffering.

James himself said in chapter one, blessed is the one who perseveres under trial. Because having stood the test, the person will receive the crown of life that God has promised to all who love him.

[24 : 41] And so be patient, says James. If you are suffering, stand firm, trusting God with your whole heart. And persevere knowing it will be worth it.

A couple we know are called Richard and Bronwyn. In fact, I suspect some of you may know them. Bronwyn had been battling with cancer for a couple of years before she died.

And a month before she died, her husband wrote this email, which is on the next slide. He wrote, in God's kindness, she seems stable in this more fragile state and remains cheerful.

Her constant exhortation to us from her Bible reading is to remain thankful to God in all circumstances. She's got cancer. She's about to die.

That's what she writes. Although the future seems uncertain, we rest in God's certain and sovereign care. And this was her perspective all the way through her suffering.

[25 : 37] That God is in control to even remind her family to be thankful. Why? Well, she doesn't say there, but I also, I know from other comments that it's because she knew she was God's child.

She knew what awaited her and her family. And although the prospect of being separated from her family, not seeing her four kids grow up and her girls get married, it grieved her greatly.

Yet she knew God would bring her into glory. And so she persevered. She stood firm. She continued to trust God wholeheartedly. Even up to her death.

And this is what James is saying to the readers now. Stand firm. Be patient. Even in suffering, Jesus will return. He will put all things right. It will be worth it.

Well, this is James's wisdom for us tonight, or rather it is God's wisdom from above, as we saw last week. And so just as my daughter needed to have a right perspective when it came to headbands, I want to encourage us to have the right perspective when it comes to our plans, when it comes to our prosperity, and to our pain.

[26 : 47] And so let's pray that God would help us to have his perspective. Let's pray. Our gracious heavenly father, we do thank you for this letter of James.

We thank you that he addresses real situations, real life, and that he offers us your wisdom in how to deal with it. Yet, father, it is hard to live this way.

And so father, we pray that you would help us, help us to have your perspective when it comes to making plans, when it comes to prosperity, and even when it comes to pain.

Father, help us in this, that we might grow more and more like the Lord Jesus Christ. We ask it in his name. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[27 : 56] Hey,