

SUMMER 5

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Date: 30 January 2002

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] and it's James chapter 5 and it can be found on page 982 of the Pew Bibles come now you rich people weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you your riches have rotted and your clothes are moth eaten your gold and silver have rusted and their rust will be evidence against you and it will eat your flesh like fire you have laid up treasure for the last days listen the wages of the labourers who mowed your fields which you have kept back by fraud cry out 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 pleasure you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter you have condemned and murdered the righteous one who does not resist you be patient therefore beloved until the coming of the Lord the farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth being patient with it until it receives the early and late rains you also must be patient strengthen your hearts for the coming of the Lord is near beloved do not grumble against one another so that you may not be judged see the judge is standing at the doors as an example of suffering and patience beloved take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord remember indeed we we call blessed those who showed endurance you have heard of the endurance of Job and you have seen the purpose of the Lord how the Lord is compassionate and merciful above all my beloved 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 are any among you suffering they should pray are any cheerful they should sing songs of praise are any among you sick they should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord the prayer of faith will save the sick and the Lord will raise them up and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that so that you may be healed the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective

Elijah was a human being like us and he prayed fervently that it might not rain and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth then he prayed again and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest my brothers and sisters if any among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins heavenly father we do indeed pray that you will be our vision that you will capture your our hearts by your word written on them by your spirit so that we may serve you single-mindedly to the end of our days eagerly awaiting the return of Jesus Christ Amen we've seen in the last four weeks that the letter of James is written to Christians who are what we might call double-hearted or double-souled or double-minded

Christians who on the one hand are keen and eager to serve God to love him and to look for his blessing and obey him and so on but on the other hand Christians whose hearts minds and souls are a bit torn a bit divided wanting to flirt with the world and pursue its wisdom and its treasures and pleasures as well and James has written to churches of Christian people early in the new church's history it's probably I think the first or about the first part of the New Testament that's been written urging in effect Christians not to fall away not to drift after their love of the world and friendship with the world but rather single-mindedly single-heartedly and single-souledly if we can say it like that pursue God and we see those themes continuing in this final chapter tonight in some ways the chapter break is a little bit artificial remember that chapter headings or chapters and their verse numbers are medieval in origin so in the original writing

James didn't say well here begins chapter 5 and really the beginning of chapter 5 does flow on from the end of chapter 4 and in these verses it flows on from chapter 4 in its style and in its content dealing with issues of human sovereignty so called and pursuit of wealth and being rich and so on chapter 5 begins like the previous paragraph 4 verse 13 come now or as I said last week like Captain Manning in Dad's Army now listen up men now that's what's being said in effect come pay attention to what I'm about to say but now I think James in these opening verses of chapter 5 digs the knife in a bit deeper than he was at the end of chapter 4 in a sense he's softening them up at the end of chapter 4 though his words are fairly clear against those who are trying to take matters into their own hands plan for the accumulation of wealth now in some astonishingly scathing words like last week's words in different places of chapter 4 but maybe even more so attacking wealthy

Christians who are pursuing and loving wealth rather than or in addition to loving God the words here are reminiscent of Old Testament prophets we saw hints of that last week this even more so I suspect in this opening chapter paragraph and perhaps what's even more alarming is that in some ways the words of the prophets that it reflects are the words that are addressed to pagan nations in the Old Testament prophets so here is James I'm sure still writing to Christians though there are some who doubt that but using very scathing language indeed to shock them out of their complacency I guess this issue came up last week but on reflection just to add one brief comment I suppose when we're in need we're eager to hear the words of comfort that God will bring us and so you find words of comfort in the Bible throughout and they're very clear but when we're complacent and lethargic about our faith and pursuing other things and think that we're safe then we need somebody to jolt us out of that straightforward words won't get through our hard stubborn hearts and that's why

[7 : 53] I think in the Old Testament prophets and here in James for example the words are quite shocking because he's trying to get through people's stubbornness hard-heartedness complacency and so on he's addressing rich people who are landowners in a rather agrarian and not particularly urban society most rich people would be significant landowners and he's not condemning them in this paragraph for their wealth per se but let me just say too that there are so many warnings to wealthy people in the Bible that we who are wealthy as I'm sure pretty much all of us here are really we must be very careful about our wealth it is quite a danger to be wealthy not a bad thing or an evil thing but a dangerous thing and we must be very careful about our pursuit of wealth and our use of wealth because really in world standards and world history we're among the wealthiest people who've ever lived these generations our standard of living is higher really than anybody else's in past history of any generation so these words surely we must take careful note about them and consider our own lives and our own wealth very carefully now in particular the sins that are being addressed here are firstly selfish accumulation of wealth in verses 2 and 3 but then the defrauding of the poor and the workers in verse 4 indulgent living in verse 5 and then the oppression of the righteous in verse 6 so let's see what is said here come now you rich people weep and wail words that are lifted out of the prophets whenever those words are used together and in particular the word wail is used in the

Old Testament it's always in by the prophets and nowhere else and it's always anticipating the coming day of the Lord in judgment and that's what James is doing here as well weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you he's addressing rich people who probably think they're secure and well off and comfortable but miseries are on the way his expectation or framework is he's talking about the day of the Lord when Jesus returns it will not be a day of blessing for you but a day of miseries the plural to emphasise it even more James remember has already attacked wealthy people in this letter it's not a new theme he showed the need to be caring for widows and orphans back in chapter 1 covetous desires was a danger in chapter 1 especially in contrast to what should be their generous giving in chapter 1 verse 17 but James's words here against the wealthy are no different in essence from

Jesus words in several places like Luke 6 and also we find in the book of Revelation now these he goes on then in verses 2 and 3 your riches have rotted and your clothes are moth eaten your gold and silver have rusted now I imagine he's using metaphorical language gold apparently doesn't really rust but he uses language as shock here are people probably have got fine wardrobes of clothes that are in beautiful condition and lots of ornamentation and gold and silver maybe real gold and silver maybe just other precious metals and other wealthy adornments to their life and he's saying in effect they've rotted not that they will rot but that they have to again bring out the shock value of where their wealth is it's nothing in the end it's transitory it's in the process of rotting it won't last in the description here

I'm reminded of Jay Gatsby the great Gatsby when he's showing off to the woman and he opens up his wardrobes that are stacked with shirts that he's never worn accumulation of massive wealth he shows them his library full of books he's never read that's perhaps an excessive wealth it's probably not quite as extreme as what James has in mind but people who are accumulating wealth they've got lots and lots of things much more than they need more than is sufficient that's what James is attacking here it's a selfish accumulation it's not doing good to anyone else but it's just adding up the prestige for the wealthy person in his society and this wealth that's accumulated will actually stand against the people on judgment day so their rust will be evidence against you and it will eat your flesh like fire that's a fairly awful image it's one to do of course with the day of the

Lord and on that day all this selfish accumulation of wealth will actually testify in effect against the person these Christians who are pursuing wealth at the same time trying to pursue God these double minded Christians it'll be evidence against them on that judgment day and the eating of the flesh like fire I'm sure is metaphorical but it's telling us that they will perish in judgment if they continue to accumulate wealth this way you see the accumulation of wealth spells doom it spells doom because it's selfish it is spending money for our own accumulation of things that we don't actually need and ignoring those who are needy the poor and those who need to hear the gospel it shows selfishness but it also shows a double mindedness because these are Christians being addressed but they're Christians who are being lured and tempted and excited with friendship for the world's values so they're wanting to get on in the world thinking that they can hedge their bets and still be okay with God but it also shows as the end of verse three says a lack of awareness of the last days you have laid up treasure for the last days that is you don't realize the times in which you live you live in the last days the days when this world is about to go and the new era is coming but all you're doing is stocking up more and more stuff for the current age and you're not laying up treasure in heaven it's a bit like if you were living in Paris two months ago and you went on a wild rampage of collecting

[14 : 47] French francs they're useless after January the first they're all into euros but you see if you were busy accumulating wealth in French francs under your bed for example you're storing up treasure that only will last to the end of 2000 now the analogy you can break down because you can say yes you can transfer them to euros I suppose but that's the sort of point that James is making here our accumulation of wealth is only for this age and we're in the last days we should actually be getting ready for the next era you know if you've ever moved house as I've done a number of times you tend to run down your supplies of food and so on in your cupboard it's a bit less stuff that you've got to transport when I moved to England a few years ago to live I basically sort of wore out as many clothes as I could didn't buy new clothes because I knew I could only take 20 kilograms to England for three years and I thought well what's the point of sort of accumulating clothes for now I might as well get them when I'm there sort of thing that's the sort of idea James has in mind where in the last days we should be in effect running down our resources wealth and so on here and getting ready for heaven which is coming and coming soon now he's been attacking the sin then of accumulation of wealth beyond what is our need and that's selfish and it's not showing an awareness of the days in which we live and it's showing a double-mindedness the next sin is defrauding the poor the workers verse 4 the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields which you kept back by fraud cry out again it's metaphorical language wages don't cry out but these wages do they're wages that you've kept back you haven't paid them on time you haven't paid them fully whatever the situation is you've been making money at the expense of your laborers and workers on the land which you owed or in the company which you owe and so on now Christians today are not immune from those sins there was a man who was a member of this congregation until not all that long ago who was last year sentenced to a suspended jail sentence for exactly this sort of thing fraud for not paying bills and wages as he should there are

Christians who are vulnerable to these sorts of sins I'm not breaking confidence that's a public fact about that person though I won't say who it is so we must be careful here if we're employing people if we've got servants or employees or whoever it is or whatever bills we're paying we're obliged to pay them in full and on time we must be very careful that's the and those wages are crying out the suggestion there is that God knows you may be somehow cheating the system so that people don't know but God knows and on the day of judgment you'll face the judgment of that sin even if you think and can get away with it here and now just like Abel's blood cried out from the ground when Cain had slain him and God knew Cain thought he could get away with it he couldn't so too these people I suggest thought that they can get away with it but

God sees and knows and his judgment day is coming and coming soon and indeed the end of verse 4 says about the cries of the harvesters they've reached the ears of the Lord of hosts the Lord of armies literally that is the Lord Almighty and so there's a suggestion in the way God is described there that you will face in a sense God with all his army arrayed against you on that judgment day not something to look forward to indeed now the third sin in this list for wealthy Christians is in verse 5 this is indulgent living you have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure two words to sort of compound the emphasis if you like of this luxurious pleasure that people are enjoying I suspect if James were here today he could possibly level that charge at virtually all of us in some ways our society is full of indulgent living indeed the slogans of our society are all about indulgent living every advertisement is about indulgent living in a way pampering ourselves getting the best when only the best will do and so on we must be very careful about our pursuit of pleasure and luxury our spending of wealth in indulgent ways James is attacking that sin here and his words are again quite shocking at the end of the verse you've lived on earth in luxury and in pleasure and you fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter as though we are cattle that are gradually just eating up and getting bigger and bigger ready to be sacrificed but the day of the Lord will not be a day of salvation but a day of slaughter a day of judgment for us I think the words and certainly the image is reminiscent of in the prophet Amos you fat cows of Bashan who are just lolling about in indulgent living the same sort of thing is going on here with the church that

James is writing to and then the final accusation against wealth is in verse 6 you have condemned and murdered the righteous one who does not resist you now some think that that's meaning Jesus because it says the righteous one but I think the language is probably not referring to him and there's certainly nothing in the context about that that the readers of this were those who put Jesus to death probably he's just talking about the righteous person that is any typical godly follower of Christ is a righteous person and you are murdering or condemning and murdering them he doesn't resist you this poor but righteous person represents no threat to you and yet you condemn and you murder it may be that you condemn by false charges against them in order maybe to make further gain for yourself and it may be that you murder them not by sentencing them to death though that could be a possibility and and not perhaps by killing them in a field but perhaps murdering them in the sense of just depriving them of their basic needs leading to starvation that perhaps is the most likely reference to what's being spoken about here well we may think oh we don't we don't end up at that extreme maybe not the thing is when we pursue wealth it becomes our god you cannot serve wealth and god if wealth becomes our god then in the end we will not stop at anything to keep pursuing money and in this country in the last 15 years we've seen a number of people who've in public life have become quite wealthy and sometimes ended up doing so corruptly we must be careful that we don't go down a path that looks a little bit enticing and not too harmful but in fact ends up in spiritual death well James moves on to another topic although he links it by the word therefore in verse 7 to what precedes and as we've seen in this letter

James sort of seems to jump around a bit but the overriding theme is he's addressing double minded Christians who are wanting to get on in the world but also get on with God and you can't do both now the issue also has of the previous paragraph was this anticipation of the day of the Lord it will be a day of judgment for those who are wealthy and abusers of wealth who are Christians how should we look forward to the day of the Lord then and that's the issue in this paragraph verses 7 to 11 and the key theme is patience notice how words like patience recur several times verse 7 twice be patient therefore beloved until the coming of the Lord the farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth being patient with it until he receives the early and the late rains you also must be patient the word again in verse 8 and then the verse 10 the word patience appears again in verse 11 you get the word endure and endurance although in our translation it's just endurance twice but the first one is literally those who endure you have heard of the endurance of Job so patience and endurance is the key means by which we are to anticipate the coming of the

[23 : 47] Lord at the end of history and this coming of the Lord will be the coming of the judge he's beginning of verse 7 be patient until the coming of the Lord and then in verse 8 you must be patient strengthen your hearts for the coming of the Lord is near and then in verse 9 do not grumble against one another so that you may not be judged see the judge is standing at the door so it's the coming of the Lord then the coming of the Lord is near and then verse 9 heightens it even further by saying the judge is at the door and you see here what the coming of the Lord's about it's about judgment and James is urging his readers to be ready for the coming of the Lord because all of us will face judgment Christians are not exempt from judgment when we're saved it doesn't mean that we've got a sort of bypass the judgment day we still have to face the judgment throne of God and Christ now they say patience is a virtue get it while you can and I won't give the sexist part of the that and parents try to teach their children patience but the trouble is the world is impatient it's more and more impatient we we want results now we're tempted by the advertisements on television that we can get what we want now how many footy coaches last a few years in the job because no one's patient to let them rebuild a team you're given a year a season two or three if you're very lucky if you haven't got results you're out the next one's in and if you're St Kilda it doesn't even last a few months so impatience is the name of our society so this patience and endurance that's being commended here does not come easily to us doesn't come readily we are to practice perhaps consciously even being patient for the day of the coming of the Lord it's not something that comes readily and our world seeks to undermine it by its impatience James then says to the beloved brothers and sisters he uses an affectionate term because now having rebuked these rich Christians he's perhaps including them but especially maybe the poorer Christians who are being oppressed and are suffering he's addressing them with terms of affection as he does from time to time through through this letter brothers and sisters or beloved as it's translated in the

NRSV that we have here and this is the corrective in one sense to the previous paragraph but it's also perhaps keeping in mind the poorer folk having addressed the richer folk but there are words for the rich here as well there's encouragement here for the suffering poor but it's not a it's not an encouragement that should lead to complacency either the same coming Lord will judge poor and rich alike and the rich their day of the Lord will be a day of slaughter but for the poor the day of the Lord will be a day of vindication if they're right with God there's no hint here of taking vengeance there's no hint here of the poor sort of rising up in an agrarian revolution or anything like that they are to wait for the coming of the Lord that is they may undergo significant lifelong oppression being mistreated abused and done bad deals against but there's no sense here of trying in this life to overcome all that overturn the tables or anything like that not that there is no place for

Christians to have a voice to overcome injustice now but the primary thing here is to be patient for the day of the Lord the coming of the Lord is literally the word *parousia* which means presence but it's the word that's used in the Bible technically to talk about the coming of Jesus when he returns in Greek it had the sense of the arrival of the king or of a person of nobility a dignitary in a grand sort of entrance and so the words taken up and used for the return of Jesus in glory at the end of history the example of the farmer is given in the second half of verse 7 he waits for the precious crop from the earth being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains the rains that would come in late autumn and in early spring the key rains of Israel and Palestine whenever the expression early rains and late rains gets mentioned in the Old Testament which it does a number of times it is always in the context of the faithfulness of God to provide and that context is probably carried over into the expression James uses here he's speaking about a godly faithful farmer one who is trusting God to provide what he is what is needed for him in the early and the late rains so that a harvest and a crop can be can come out so James here when he's talking about us being patient waiting for the coming of the Lord is urging us to do so with confidence in God's faithfulness just as God promised to bring the rains in their season for his people when they obeyed him so we are to wait for the coming of the Lord with confidence that he'll keep that promise and come in his time one day now in verse 8 the same themes are there but a couple of new ideas are added to it firstly the idea of strengthen your hearts is added that is our waiting patiently is not an idle thing we are to strengthen our hearts with firm and confident faith that is it's something that we consciously do we don't just sort of sit back and close our eyes and have a nap and think well you know only a few more sleeps and he'll be here that is there's a sense of our own activity strengthening our hearts strengthening our hearts that is awaiting Jesus return the coming of the day and in particular the strengthening of hearts is against the trials the temptations the sins of the world that are so alluring and enticing that the Christians here that James is writing to face the other idea that's added in verse 8 is that the coming of the Lord is near it's not a long long way away it is near now the expression the coming of the coming of the coming of the coming of the coming of the Lord being near is one that not only James in the New Testament uses but Paul does Peter does Jesus does as well 2000 years later there are plenty of people in the world who think that James Peter Paul Jesus all got it wrong they thought he was going to come near soon in their own lifetime he didn't so they're wrong and many of those people would say well he's not really coming and there are many who would say well he's not coming quite how they expected actually he's already come in a in a way that's hidden some Christian or non-Christian sects have been like that over the centuries as well in the eternal scale the coming of Jesus again is very near when we've been in heaven 10,000 years or more we may well think yes Jesus actually did get it quite right when we've been in heaven millions and millions of years we'll have no doubt probably it's very near if you put in this scale of eternity but the other thing about it being near the second thing is that the point about Jesus coming again in glory to judge being near is that it is now the next event in the steps or sequence of key salvation events in history

God created he created human beings they sinned and then you've got key events of promises to Abraham and the exodus and the coming into the land and the kingdom and the temple and the exile and then Jesus coming and then he dies and he rises and he ascends to heaven and the next event in the sequence is he will come again in glory so in that sense it's near it's the next event in line but it's also near in the sense of that is how we are to expect and anticipate it that is we are to live as though Jesus could come at any time the nearness of the coming of the Lord is not just you see speaking about time or dates or years it is speaking about how do we live now and that is always in the New Testament the function of talking about the coming of the Lord or talking about heaven that is it's about how we live now it's not to tell us all the details about what that day is going to be like what heaven's going to be like to say that we we know it's all to influence how we live now we are to live as if it could happen at any time indeed it could beware of those Christians who say no there's a whole sequence of things that have yet to happen you know all the Israelites have got to be saved and there's got to be a clear man of lawlessness and all these sorts of things I think they misunderstand too much of

Thessalonians and Revelation and other places the the overriding emphasis in the scriptures of the New Testament is that Jesus could come at any time so don't think there's a whole lot of things that are yet to happen therefore we're safe we're not in the sense that he could come any moment and of course the flip side of that is none of us can guarantee how long we'll live for anyway even if he doesn't come we could die tonight and then in effect he's come for us so the the emphasis here for James is we must be living we are in the last days he talked about that in the previous paragraph those who hadn't been aware of that we must be anticipating his nearness of coming then in verse 9 he goes on what looks at first sight to be a slight digression beloved do not grumble against one another so that you may not be judged well I think well where does that fit well Christians who perhaps are under pressure suffering oppressed are quite vulnerable to end up grumbling with each other ancient Israel in the wilderness is a clear illustration that and even before they entered the wilderness under oppression in Egypt as well often there is a lot to grumble about in fact in Christian fellowship we could probably fill pages and pages of things to grumble about the other people who sit in the pews with us on Sunday not to speak of the person up the front but the point is not that there's nothing to grumble about the point is don't grumble against other people in Christian fellowship put those things aside remember two weeks ago the wisdom that seeks to make peace not to divide Christian fellowship that is we're to get things in a heavenly perspective here the grumbles we have are worldly concerns if we grumble too much about the things of this world then in a sense we're no better than the rich who are just accumulating the wealth of this world that is both of us in completely different ways are just focused on this world and not on the return of Jesus and the world that awaits us when he comes so grumbling now against each other is a sure sign that we're actually not living and anticipating and expecting the return of Jesus and we're no better off than the rich people condemned in the first part of the chapter so this near and then he says at the end of verse 9 see the judge is standing at the doors we're very familiar and comforted by those words of Revelation 3 that Jesus stands at the door and knocks and we want to let him in and all that sort of thing texts often abused a bit by Billy Graham but one that nonetheless warms our hearts but here the judge is standing at the door he's that close and he's ready to judge be ready and here we see two sides of the expecting of Jesus in these verses of this chapter a very severe warning for those who are practicing wrong behavior in whatever form that is

[36 : 21] Jesus will judge and we should not expect to just escape scot-free but there is also the encouragement that he is coming and he's coming near and for those who are suffering and are persecuted or oppressed or hard done by in this life that is real comfort oh we may want the injustice reversed now that's worldly impatience sometimes but we are to wait patiently and endure until he returns James then gives some examples to encourage us in this as an example of suffering and patience beloved he says in verse 10 take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord he doesn't tell us which prophets but presumably he's speaking about prophets who suffered Jeremiah suffered he bewailed his suffering in different times of his long book his life was under threat he was thrown into a cistern he was ridiculed and rejected by others in his nation there's a sense in which Ezekiel suffered his wife died he wasn't allowed to show grief although that wasn't suffering at the hands of oppression the tradition is though the Old Testament doesn't tell us this but the tradition is that Isaiah the prophet was sawn in two

Hebrews 11 talks about prophets being sawn in two and the tradition is that that was perhaps Isaiah though as I say there's nothing in the Old Testament to say that it was him and Jesus talks in various places about those who killed the prophets in the Old Testament so the prophets who spoke the word of the Lord they did the Lord's will where's the blessing heaped on them for that?

it's suffering but suffering that they patiently endured anticipating the day of the Lord to come and then in verse 11 indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance you've heard of the endurance of Job well if you read the book of Job you might think oh I don't know that he was very patient I don't know that he really endured in one sense he just kept grumbling self-righteously but at the end of the book we realize that for all Job's complaints he was a man of faith and he anticipated in effect the day of the Lord when he could stand before God and be vindicated by God that is Job's whole perspective was looking forward in effect to the heavenly throne room which is exactly the context James is urging us to have here so when we suffer inexplicably as Job did remember Job was never told why he suffered probably we suffer much less than he we're to have the same attitude of faith yes we might grumble and complain to God in a faithful way and look forward to that heavenly throne room when we'll be vindicated and James finishes verse 11 in this little section about patient endurance you've seen the purpose of the Lord how the Lord is compassionate and merciful maybe reflecting particularly Job or maybe just generally that in the examples of the prophets and Job we can see that through all their suffering and their patient endurance the purpose of God was at work it was not being thwarted and that ultimately it is true that God is merciful and compassionate not a nasty bully well at the end of this paragraph which we've taken some time over it's worth asking the question is the day of the Lord worth waiting for?

is it worth us now forsaking the fleeting pleasures of our world for the pleasures of heaven that will be given those who faithfully persevere to that day you see our world promises lots and lots of stuff now drive away no more to pay no interest or repayments till 2003 well that'd be great if Jesus came before then enjoy life now why wait until marriage to have sex enjoy it now check it out now why wait bird in the hands worth two in the bush double-minded Christians whom James is addressing and to an extent is really all of us struggle with that tension every day do we succumb to the pleasures of this world now or do we forsake sinful wrong pleasures and wait with patient endurance for the day of the Lord we might wonder now is it really going to be worth it but when we arrive in heaven we'll have no doubt that it was for the solid joys and lasting treasures of heaven will be so great it's not two in the bush compared to one in the hand it's millions and millions of joys that are solid and lasting and not fading away like the world's best pleasures are today it is worth waiting for it is worth being patient for it's worth enduring suffering for and every time we are tempted to do the wrong thing we must remind ourselves hang back there are better joys ahead if I forsake these now it's not to say that life now is not pleasurable and joyful it often is and rightly so but the joys that are wrong in this world often promise more joy than anything else but they don't last but the joys of heaven will and they are worth waiting for

James moves on in verse 12 to what looks to be another topic oaths a verse that's been misunderstood perhaps at different times by different Christian groups above all maybe finally it's hard to see why this is the above all thing the most important thing and probably he's just winding up the end of the letter my beloved 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 some for example Anabaptists in the Reformation or post-Reformation period thought that we should not make any oath never in court make an oath this is telling us no but I think what James is saying here is not quite so blunt or straightforward or legalistic as that he's saying that our language ought to be so clear that our yes is yes and our no is no that we need not make any oaths to underscore our veracity that is sometimes we say you know I'm going to do something and in order to try and convince somebody that we're going to do it we might make an oath or maybe that's what James has in mind here it ought to be that we don't need to make an oath because if we say that we'll do something or say that this will happen or whatever then people ought to know that our word stands we are people of integrity we're not double-minded we're not going to say one thing and do another that's the issue that he's addressing here our integrity as people as Christians especially in our words and we've seen already in recent weeks the importance of words to James in this letter well then the last main section is to do with praise the suggestion is not just pray once or sing a song but as a regular consistent pattern keep on praying keep on singing songs and psalms not as though that's the only thing you ever do but it should be a regular pattern of your life if you're cheerful express your gratitude to God if you're suffering keep praying that's the pattern but then now James has a specific situation in verse 14 are any among you sick?

[44 : 17] now this is a contentious place because it looks as though in these verses that follow James is saying God promises to heal now so long as we've got faith and do it right and have the right sort of oil and the right sort of elders we'll be guaranteed healing and there are Christians who believe that that is what this is about I'm not sure that that's what James is teaching here I also think that if we think that that's what it's about then we run into great difficulties when people are not healed enormous pastoral difficulties it seems to me a few months ago I was in Nigeria teaching and not this passage but in the book of Revelation and made a comment somehow I can't quite remember how I made this comment but it was picked up on in questions about preparing people for dying when they were dying and the implication was that I wasn't thinking that God could heal they were tackling me because they believed or at least the two or three that questioned me believed that God promises to heal now and that must be our claim and if someone isn't healed then presumably they or the elders lack faith well I think that's pastorally disastrous to be honest and for the elders as well as the person who's unwell and not getting healed the language that James uses in these verses 14-15 in particular is language that is a bit let me say ambiguous

I don't mean too vague that is that the language he uses here does look as though at one level it's talking about physical illness sickness healing but it is also language that is used and in some parts exclusively so to do with spiritual illness we might call and in many ways the context of the letter fits the latter not the former best although I don't think it's one not the other I think it's in a sense you know there is an element of physical stuff here as well so when he says are any among you sick the idea is also along the lines of weak for example being spiritually weak that's how the word is used in some other places in the New Testament in Hebrews and Romans for example and so what what the context is and that fits the whole context of this letter James is writing to people who are spiritually weak they are double minded double soul double hearted people Christians they are torn between love for the world and love for God and so that's the general context in which he's writing this letter here he's writing we might say to weary wobbly weak Christians someone called

James the letter for spiritual middle aged people that is people whose faith is getting a bit flabby and it's a little bit too sort of not being exercised enough not being strengthened enough losing its muscle in verse 15 about the prayer of the faith will save the sick and the Lord will raise them up it could be along the lines of the prayer the faith will save the weary that's how the word is used in other places so we have to be and the word save as well the word heal is the word save which in some places does clearly mean physical healing in Luke's gospel in some places but on the other hand the word also has a spiritual dimension to it so I don't think we should be speaking purely physical or purely spiritual but the weight of the letter makes me think that James is speaking particularly about weak Christians spiritually weak or ill Christians he says call for the elders in verse 14 now that's easy enough to do if you're physically ill if you're seriously ill suggestion here

I think by calling for the elders and have them pray over you suggests that you're bedridden is the sort of image that's created by that and I guess if we're particularly ill it's not a bad thing or not a hard thing to call for the elders to pray and certainly in many cases I with some other elders or leaders of church here and other places have come and prayed and anointed someone who's sick with oil it's much more tricky if we're spiritually weak are you going to call for the elders if you feel that your faith is getting flabby if you feel that you're really torn between the world and God I think I'm right in saying that I've yet to meet anyone in a church I've ministered in who's come to me or anyone I know in the church and said I feel that I'm drifting away from faith can you get people to come and pray for me and anoint me now I might be wrong but I've never met someone like that that would be a very humble thing to do it seems to me but you see that's what James has been commending if you remember back to last week he said

God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble and I think he's addressing here weak Christians who are struggling and he's in effect saying humble yourselves to ask for prayer but you see so often it seems to me Christians who are weak and falling away from the faith are far too proud and stubborn to call for any spiritual help they think somehow they've still got it together though they obviously don't but James I think here is picking up the same idea you've got to humble yourself by asking for other people to pray for you you see later on he'll say the prayers of a righteous person are effective but if a person is spiritually weak I think by implication their prayers may not be effective God in his grace may still answer them of course so that's why you get other people to pray for you because you need their prayers because you yourself are torn between the world and God that I think is probably the key context of these verses but I'm not dismissing the fact that it could still be sick people not least because in the ancient world and in the scriptures there is often but not always a connection between we might say sin and sickness we see that being made by Jesus in Mark chapter 2 with the man who's paralyzed lowered through the roof but in other contexts

[50 : 33] Jesus makes it clear that somebody's sin is not the cause of sickness sometimes it can be sometimes it may not be we could ask here why does James say in verse 14 about anointing with oil the only other time that somebody is sick is anointed with oil is in Mark's gospel chapter 6 it's not explained there why they anoint with oil though clearly it's physical there that may suggest again the physical side here some people think it's medicinal oil is a sort of skin lotion but the trouble is there's no limitation here of the illness sickness or weakness it's not saying if you're sick with a skin disease be anointed with oil as though that is a medicinal thing some say that it's a sacramental thing that's how the Roman Catholic Church has taken this to be extreme unction or anointing the dying last right sort of thing because that seems to mistrust completely what it's saying because if you anoint with oil the person will be restored that's not what extreme unction is about that's about preparing someone to die maybe though where anointing is used by far the most cases in the Old

Testament is for consecration you anoint a priest or a king somebody for a particular office of devotion to God and that fits the person who is flagging in their faith and zeal that is they need some sort of prayers for other people so that they can be re-consecrated into Christian life and ministry and service that is they're wanting to recapture their love of God and not drift away they're wanting to be single-minded hearted and sold not double-minded hearted or sold so the anointing with oil seems here to fit that theme of consecration that is they're wanting to be consecrated for God's service and not be torn and divided between God and the world the unconditional promise in verse 15 is quite striking after calling for the elders anointing them with oil we're told then the prayer of faith will save the sick or the weary is how the word can be used that's unconditional promise the only condition in one sense is that the prayer is a prayer of faith and that is coming from the elders not the sick person and that's why I think probably it's more likely to be a person who is struggling themselves

I mean there's no reason why a sick person's prayers can't be effective if they're physically sick but if they're spiritually sick then that's when their prayers won't be effective and that's why the prayers of elders are needed the Lord will raise them up that may refer to resurrection day but the word is a bit broader than that just restore them it may be restore health if it is physical but certainly restoring them into Christian faith is the idea here predominantly I think and then it says in anyone who's committed sins will be forgiven there clearly the context is spiritual rather than physical although if it's physical caused by a sin then that fits as well but here the context is if you've been drifting away flirting with the world committing sins with the world then coming back prayers of elders anointing God will answer the prayers and sins will be forgiven that has to happen if you're going to be restored into a relationship with God but certainly when it says if literally the end of verse 15 says and if anyone has committed sins it's not quite in this translation that may not be the case now in saying this I guess if somebody is seriously ill

I think it's a good question to ask is there some sin that God is alerting me to it may not be a sin that directly causes the illness but it may the illness may be a means by which God is trying to help you see an area of your life that you need to clean up that you hadn't noticed I remember 15 16 17 years ago having glandular fever and being wisely I think encouraged to think through on my life was were the areas of my life where perhaps some sin was going on not causing directly the glandular fever but the glandular fever may have been something from God to awaken me to sins that needed repentance in the end I wasn't sure that that was the case but it may have been it's worth trying if we're particularly ill I should also say that my reading of verse 15 is that this Lord raising them up is something that I think James is expressing as an imminent thing he's not talking about resurrection day that yeah in heaven it'll all be right that's how sometimes people understand these this expression or these verses they don't want to say

God will heal now he'll heal in heaven that's what it's about but I think the language here is more imminent than that let me also say I don't think we can say well this applied only to the early church it doesn't apply today that's also how some people have understood this as though watering it down saying it only applied when the apostles were alive that people who are sick could get healed I don't also think that that is the case either so therefore James extending or broadening the case in verse 16 doesn't mention elders but every Christian confess your sins to one another pray for one another so that you may be healed that is there is a mutual responsibility for Christians in a church to be praying for each other for spiritual faith and healing and health the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective the next couple of verses are astonishing I think Elijah now is the example now Elijah is one of the great heroes of the Old Testament he was a man of miracles at a crucial time in

[56 : 10] Israel's history when they were really very much going down the wrong path of the worship of Baal Elijah of course not only was a miracle worker but he was taken to heaven he didn't die and then he's expected to return at the end of the Old Testament in Malachi and then of course he's with Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration as well in the New Testament and John the Baptist is tied to him as well he's an amazing man he's a sort of hero that we would look up to and think wow but he's a person just like us James says and that's the astonishing thing we look to these heroes and think wow look at the things they did but here am I just me but notice what James says Elijah was a human being like us he's just like us and so therefore he's an example for us to follow now the example that's given here is astonishing if James's focus was on physical healing why doesn't he cite one of Elijah's prayers when he brought someone back from the dead or healed them but he talks about

Elijah's prayer to cause a drought and then to end a drought why that prayer because the issue is predominantly spiritual ill health and in the time of Elijah more than perhaps any other time in Israel the nation's history they were spiritually unwell they're on the verge of giving up Yahweh the God of the Old Testament completely and worshipping the Baal gods of Canaan completely and the life of Elijah in one sense culminates with his contest with the prophets of Baal on the top of Mount Carmel but this praying for drought and then for rain was a clear threat to Baal because the Baals the Canaanite gods were fertility gods they were in control of rain and sun so Elijah's prayer to Yahweh the God of the Old Testament for drought and then for rain showed Israel who was God Yahweh not

Baal and Israel's double mindedness by trying to worship Baal and Yahweh in some sort of syncretistic combination was futile was indeed grossly wrong so the prayer that James cites is one that deals with Israel's double mindedness and that is why I think he cites that example of Elijah here as well well the final two verses finish off the letter fairly bluntly let me say there's no sorts of you know greet so and so and so and so like Paul often does none of that from James just a couple of verses that's the end not even cheerio see you later my brothers and sisters if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins and when we understand what these verses about prayer and anointing are about spiritual ill health in effect these last two verses tidy it up neatly that is these prayers these elders and anointing of oil and so on is in effect about bringing back from spiritual death

Christians who've pursued the path towards death so in a sense 19 and 20 is about the results of verses 13 to 18 by your prayers for somebody who's spiritually compromised and needs your prayers the prayers of a righteous effective person you will save a soul from death a wandering sinner you'll bring him back restore him to Christian faith and fellowship that will cover over a multitude of sins not your sins but that wandering person's sins they'll be forgiven is what's being meant there that is yes he may have committed gross sins given up what to all intents and purposes the Christian faith wandered far from faith by pursuing and flirting with the world and its friendship but in your prayers and bringing him back admittedly there's a humility because he asks for the elders to pray his sins will be covered over forgiven atoned for and he'll be restored into Christian fellowship and into Christian faith what happened if a person's proud there's an element of humility there just like the prodigal son's humility in turning and coming back to his father but as we saw last week

God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble and that's why James can be so unconditional about the results of these prayers God gives grace to the humble so if a person who is spiritually compromised and weak and double minded and double soul and double hearted is humble enough to ask for prayer to be restored to faith God will give grace to the humble he'll forgive their sins and bring them back into fellowship unconditionally it fits exactly the context of this whole letter of James it's what this letter is about it reminds us then that being a Christian is not an individualistic thing it's not about me and God Christian faith is personal but it's not private it is public and by being a Christian we place ourselves into a relationship of mutual accountability and responsibility with other Christians not least in our own local congregation therefore if someone within our congregation drifts from God whether or not they keep coming to church we are responsible to urge them to come back we're responsible to urge them to have prayer that they may be restored to their faith and come back into a right relationship with

[61 : 52] God it is our responsibility and likewise if we are struggling with our faith and don't kid ourselves about it we all to a small or great extent are double minded double sold and double hearted we are to be humble enough to ask for prayer and don't think that the leaders of the church are immune from this either I am just as vulnerable in some ways if not more so than anyone who sits in the pew week by week by week there are not that many ministers who last the distance in Christian ministry in our day and age so we must pray for each other and humble ourselves before each other and pray that any wandering soul will be saved from death their sins covered over and brought back to life in Christ