

Getting Perspective

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[0 : 00] Thank you again to the choir, the great words that you reminded us of. How about I pray for us before we look at the next installment of James' letter.

Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we thank you for the reminder we've heard this morning that this day, almost 2,000 years ago, Jesus rode into Jerusalem and people shouting Hosanna, but only to hear a week later people shouting crucify.

Father, we thank you for Jesus and his death for us as the choir so beautifully reminded us this morning. And we thank you for his resurrection to new life so that we too may have life with you now and forever.

And so Father, given what you've done for us, we pray that you would help us particularly to listen to you, especially as we look at the book of James this morning with its challenges there for us.

Help us to understand the wisdom you give us in it. And more than that, as James himself says, give us hearts to live it out. We ask it in Jesus' day. Amen.

[1 : 13] Amen. Well, I was walking out of the church driveway, this first, the southern one just out here, just to go next door to where I live.

And I was on the footpath when I heard this almighty scream come from my house. Now, I knew who it was.

It was one of my daughters. And so I pelted down the driveway, burst inside the house and saw my daughter in tears. I'd felt sick inside and quickly asked Michelle what had happened.

Had she hurt herself? No. Her headband wouldn't stay on her head. Now, I hate it when my headbands don't stay on my head too, right?

We all have bad hair days. But I tried to explain to her that in the grand scheme of things, headbands were not all that important. You see, she needed to get some perspective on this issue.

[2 : 20] We often have to teach our children or grandchildren, don't we, to get things into perspective. But it's not just children who need to be taught. James feels that his adult readers need to be taught also.

For as we come to this next part of James, James addresses three groups of people, it seems. Have a look at your Bibles. Gary was very right to read chapter 5. That was the reading given to him.

But we are going to look at from chapter 4, verse 13. So there's three groups of people. Chapter 4, verse 13 is one. He says, Now listen, you who say... Do you see that there?

That's the first group. And then he repeats that in chapter 5 to a different group. Now listen, you rich people. Group number two. And then group number three, chapter 5, verse 7. Be patient then, brothers and sisters.

You see that? He's addressing three groups of people. And each group he addresses, he teaches them to have a right perspective on an issue in life. And so what we have this morning is God's perspective in three areas of life, which are listed in your outlines.

[3 : 23] They are plans, prosperity and pain. So let's have a look at them in that order. Firstly, plans. Verse 13, James says, chapter 4, verse 13. 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.

James starts here by saying, now listen. So he obviously has something important to say. But what is the problem? I mean, we all make plans, don't we?

We think about where we'll go on holidays or where we'll go tomorrow even, which jobs we should keep working in and so on, how much money we should earn or need to earn to survive.

In fact, there is even a sense in which we should plan. Otherwise, we'll just meander through life, not making the most of the gifts and resources 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. He says, James is not so much against planning per se, but he's against the arrogant attitude behind their plans, you see.

[4 : 47] You see, they are boasting about their plans in a way that assumes that they are in control and can do whatever they like. But James says in verse 14, get some perspective. First of all, you don't even know what will happen tomorrow.

And we know that ourselves, don't we? For example, when it comes to our health, we're not in control, are we? Many here know this firsthand, sadly. And when it comes to work, we're not in control.

I spoke to my brother recently. He's just started a new job and he could be made redundant. A couple of months after starting. Or you probably heard about not too long ago, Telstra making 600 employees redundant here in Melbourne.

We don't have to look too hard, you see, to realize that we're not really in control of our lives. But God is. He is sovereign. We've been reading through the book of Proverbs in our first reading.

And later on in chapter 19 of Proverbs, there was a slide for this. It says this. Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails.

[5 : 47] In other words, God is the one who is in control, not us. And so to boast in our plans is to forget that we're not in control. As verse 14 says, we cannot even be sure of what will happen tomorrow.

But what's more, to boast in our plans is to pretend we're actually God. And so James says also in verse 14, who do you think you are? Compared to God, you're nothing but a mist that is here today, gone tomorrow.

Get some perspective, he says. And instead of boasting arrogantly, plan with humility. Have a look at verse 15, the verse I skipped over. Verse 15, instead, you ought to say, if it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or do that.

Now, the word humility is not actually in verse 15 there. But the idea is, we are to make plans. When we make plans, we are to acknowledge that God is in control, that God is God and we are not.

Now, I don't think James means that we have to literally say the words, if the Lord wills, every time we make a plan. I think I might go out for coffee today, if the Lord wills.

[6 : 54] I think I might go and visit someone tomorrow, if the Lord wills. I don't think he's saying we have to literally say that every time. I mean, you can say that and not mean it, can't you? Rather, he's more interested about having the right attitude behind the words.

Instead of having an arrogant attitude that thinks we are in control, we'd have a humble attitude that knows God is. And so that means we'll humbly pray about our plans when we're making them, acknowledging that God is in control.

It means that we'll trust God even when his plans turn out to be different to our plans. That's the hard part, isn't it? We won't think that we know better than God, but we'll humbly trust him even if we don't understand.

A married couple from one of my old churches planned to have four children, nice and even. When the wife became pregnant, they found out they had twins.

Halfway there, 50%, one hit. So they were quite excited. But then they found out that both of them, not one, but both had severe autism.

[7 : 56] And that was certainly not what they had planned for. And so they had to change their plan for four children and just stick with these two because they required so much more care. Yet when you meet them, they are still committed Christians who continue to joyfully and humbly trust God, even though they don't know why this has happened, even though it wasn't their plan.

How can they do that? Well, because they know what God's plan included, that it included giving up his son for them. They know that God's plan includes working for their good to be made like Jesus.

They know God's plan is based on God's wisdom and good character. And so they can humbly trust him, even when it doesn't seem to make sense. And when we make plans, we need to do so with the right perspective, James says, one which humbly acknowledges God as God and trusts him.

And not to do so is actually sin. See verse 17? If anyone then knows the good they ought to do and does not do it, it is sin for them. Sin is not just doing the bad things we shouldn't do.

It's also not doing the good things we know we should, says James. That's the first area where to get some perspective on. The second one James wants to have some perspective on is prosperity.

[9 : 17] Point two, chapter five, verse one. And to feel the full weight of this, we need to read these six verses together. Chapter five, verse one, he says, now listen, you rich people. Weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you.

Your wealth has rotted and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. 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 moved your fields, sorry, 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.

Wow. It's pretty heavy words, aren't they? And so I guess the first question we want to know is, who are these rich people? Because I hope they're not us. Well, I think they are rich non-Christians who are exploiting James's readers, some of them anyway.

[10 : 24] Why do I think this? Well, James doesn't seem to treat them as Christians, does he? He doesn't give them any commands to kind of stop doing that and repent and live a different way like he did with the first group.

He told them to stop being boastful in their plans and to humbly confess that God is in control. But there's no such instruction in this group. Rather, it's just plain judgment for hoarding their wealth and exploiting the poor.

And so I take it this group refers to a group of non-Christian rich people. But if this is the case, if they are addressed to non-Christians, why does James include it in this letter to Christians?

Well, it could be that some of these rich unbelievers or non-Christians actually came to church occasionally. Chapter 2 seems to indicate that there were rich people who came to James's church and some of the poor people were showing them favoritism, if you remember that.

And those rich people were the very ones exploiting the poor, chapter 2, verse 6, dragging them into court and blaspheming the name of Jesus. And so if they did come to church pretending to be pious but not really Christian, then they would have heard this stern warning and perhaps repented.

[11 : 32] It could be that. But I suspect James is doing here what the Old Testament prophets often did. The Old Testament prophets would often stand in front of Israel and say, Woe to you, Assyria!

They talk about another nation in front of Israel that announced judgment on different nations to Israel. And they did this for two reasons. First, so that Israel could take comfort in the fact that these other nations who oppressed them will be held accountable.

And so for James, he announces judgment on the rich non-Christians to comfort his poor oppressed Christians. It's as though he's saying, Don't worry about these people who mistreat you.

God will hold them accountable. Look what is going to happen to them. Take comfort. Justice will prevail. And this kind of makes sense of verse 7, which actually starts with therefore. Therefore, be patient, brothers and sisters, knowing that the rich will face judgment.

And that's the first reason. And the second reason the prophets told Israel about the judgment on other nations was to warn Israel not to be like them. And for James, it would act a similar way.

[12 : 40] He would be telling his readers and us to make sure that we have a right perspective on wealth, on prosperity. And there are four things in this passage that the rich are judged for that we need to watch out for.

Three of them are found in verses 4 to 6. Have a look at verse 4. First, they are exploiting workers. That's one thing they're judged for. Verse 5, they are self-indulgent.

Second, a third one is verse 6. They are killing and condemning innocent people, presumably by withholding their wages so that they starve to death. This is what the love of money has led them to.

But the one I think we need to heed particularly, the warning I think we need to listen to particularly, is in verses 2 and 3. Let me read them to you again. Verse 2, he says, Now the phrase, the last days here, refers to the time just before Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead, which is now.

Now, we're in the last days according to the Bible. The days when we should be making every effort to use our resources to help people become Christians and to grow as Christians before it's too late.

[13 : 57] But these people here in James chapter 5 are hoarding their wealth. Literally, they are storing up treasures on earth, which sounds an awful lot like something that 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 actually testify against them. See verse 3? It says, their corrosion will testify against you.

And what does this mean? How does their corrosion testify against them? Well, I take it, James is talking about their lack of use will testify against them.

You see, instead of using their money to help others, instead of being generous, it's as though the money has just sat there, gathering dust and corroding away. And that will testify against them.

Instead of being generous, they have hoarded. And it's this lack of generosity that will stand against them, James is saying, that will condemn them to judgment. That's the fire language on that last day.

[14 : 57] Now, it's important to notice here that James is not against being rich per se. Otherwise, many of us here would be in trouble because we all live in Australia, which is a very wealthy country compared to many others.

Rather, in this particular example, he's against the love of money and the lack of generosity. It's attitudes again. Of course, we need to be wise and we need to plan and we even need to save money.

We're actually told in the Bible that we as parents need to save up so that we won't be a burden on our children. Our two Corinthians. But we need to watch that our saving does not become hoarding, you see.

And the way to tell is to ask ourselves, are we still being generous? Are we trusting in God or our money under the mattress or wherever it is? In the words of Jesus, which I'm sure were in the back of James's mind and will come up on the screen.

He says, 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. That is by being generous towards God, his work and his people.

[16 : 06] That's the perspective we're to have. And it's a perspective that I know many of you do have. I know of people in this church who have tied their inheritance that they've received. Others who have put provisions in their wills for gospel work to continue after they've passed.

I remember at another church, we were planning an outreach event for children. It was to do with soccer and we needed some money. And this person just casually piped up, I've got a thousand dollars burning a hole in my wallet.

You can have that. Now, the amount is irrelevant. It's the attitude that I was encouraged by. So he was a person who did not love money so much that he hoarded it.

It was overindulgement, but he was generous and eager to use what God had given him for God's glory. In other words, he was a man who had a right perspective on prosperity.

That's the second group. Well, the third and final group James addresses are the Christians who are suffering. And James seeks to encourage them by putting their pain into perspective. Point three, verse seven.

[17 : 06] He says, Be patient then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains.

Well, you too be patient and stand firm because the Lord's coming is near. The first thing he says here is to be patient because the Lord Jesus' return is near.

Jesus is about to return, in other words. It's the very next thing on God's agenda. And this means judgment for those rich who are oppressing them. But it also means salvation for those who are trusting Jesus.

No more tears, pain or death. Just enjoying the fullness of God's blessings forever. Of course, we often, and myself included, often think that Jesus is taking some time to return.

After all, it's been almost 2,000 years. But we need to remember what God says in 2 Peter, that God is also being patient with his people. Giving them, well, more people, giving them more time to repent and trust in Jesus.

[18 : 09] That's why he's holding off, so that more people can repent and turn to Jesus. And so we too need to be patient, just as God is being patient. As a farmer has to be patient for rain and crops, so too do we need to be patient for Jesus' return and for freedom from our pain and suffering.

Of course, having patience is easier said than done, especially in our world today where everything is so instantaneous, isn't it? In fact, I once heard another minister say, I used to pray for patience, but then I stopped because God was taking too long to answer.

Of course, he was joking. But we find it hard to be patient sometimes, 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 be patient for God to answer our prayers.

Instead, we're much more prone to grumbling about the situation. I can't believe this traffic. Look at this shopping queue. They should put more people on the checkout or whatever it is. And often when our patience is tested and we're under pressure, we also grumble against one another.

You know, the people closest to us, don't we? Indeed, as we saw last week, the readers were fighting and quarrelling because they wanted things. Perhaps because in their suffering, they didn't have them.

[19 : 25] Either way, James says we should be patient. And verse 9, don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The judge is standing at the door.

That is, Jesus is about to return. He's at the door. It's the next big thing on God's agenda. And it means all those who have pressed us, as I said, will have to give an account. But so too will we. Of course, we can plead Christ's blood.

But nonetheless, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians, we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account for our life. And so says James, watch what you say, even in suffering, even when it's hard.

And this also means telling the truth. See verse 12? He says, above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear 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. And our commentators don't know what to do with verse 12, whether it belongs in this section or the next one on prayer. I think it belongs here, as the NIV has it, because it's linked together by the phrase brothers and sisters.

[20 : 27] So see verse 7? Brothers and sisters. Verse 10? Brothers and sisters. Verse 12? Brothers and sisters. Okay? So I think it belongs here in this section. And so I suspect James is saying that even in suffering, don't grumble and don't fudge on the truth.

To get ahead. Just let your yes be yes or your no be no. Don't swear oaths. By the way, this does not mean that if we are summoned to jury duty, we cannot swear an oath.

In fact, God swears oaths in the Bible. But James is alluding to the practice of the Pharisees who said, Well, you know, there are times when you have to tell the truth completely. And there are other times when you can kind of fudge the truth.

It all depends what you swear by. So if you swear by God, then you have to tell the truth fully. But if you swear by Jerusalem, which is less important than God, then, you know, you can kind of bend it. Fudge the truth a little.

And so if James' readers were suffering, they might have been tempted to bend the truth to get ahead. For example, they might say, Look, I swear by Jerusalem. You owe me six shekels of gold instead of five that you're telling me.

[21 : 34] You know, they might bend the truth to try and get ahead. Perhaps that was the case. But James says, No, no, don't do that. Just tell the truth, even when you're suffering, even when you're tempted to fudge on it.

Tell the truth. Don't grumble. And instead, verse 8, key verse, be patient and stand firm. In fact, the words actually stand firm are literally establish your hearts.

That is, we must patiently and wholeheartedly trust God and persevere through our tough times without grumbling against one another or fudging the truth.

And notice there's no hint at this point that their pain will actually stop before Jesus returns. He just says you've got to keep going. And to help them and encourage them to keep going, he gives two examples of perseverance.

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 blessed as those who have persevered.

[22 : 35] You have also heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy. James starts off by saying, Look at the prophets.

They persevered in trusting God and speaking God's word to people. Even when the people ridiculed them, persecuted them, and sometimes even killed them. But says James, You know we count them as blessed.

That's what Jesus said. So on the slide, we have some words from Jesus. He says, Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

Rejoice and be glad. Why? Well, because great is your reward in heaven. And because in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before them.

And so says James, Follow their example of perseverance. Or take Job. Most of us here know the story of Job. He persevered in trusting God despite his great, great suffering.

[23 : 31] And God blessed him with twice as much as he had before his suffering. And so says James, Follow his example of perseverance. And remember that the Lord is full of compassion and mercy. He won't let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.

Nor will he leave you alone and forsake you. No, he won't do that. But rather, he will help you through these tough times and will reward you at the end.

Remember James 1, verse 12? He says, 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 those who love him.

Or as Paul puts it on Romans 8 on the slide, he says, I consider my present sufferings not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us. In other words, it'll be worth it.

And so says James, Be patient. Stand firm. Establish your hearts. Keep them trusting in God throughout it all. Knowing that it will be worth it.

[24 : 31] I have some friends whose wife's name is Bronwyn. She's been battling cancer now for just over a couple of years. Just last month, we received an email to say that the cancer has progressed.

And there are more secondaries that they've found. And so they've stopped chemo treatment. And now she's receiving palliative care at home. In other words, the end is near.

But the email said this, This has been her perspective throughout her whole suffering.

That God is in control. And we ought to give thanks for his goodness, even in this. Because she knows where she is headed. Now, I also know that she mourns at the prospect of being separated from her husband.

And missing out on seeing her four children grow up. But you see, she has a right perspective in pain, doesn't she? For she continues to be patient and wholeheartedly perseveres in trusting God.

[25 : 56] Well, this is the wisdom that James has for us this morning. Or rather, as he put it back in chapter 3, this is the wisdom from heaven. This is God's wisdom for us in these areas of life.

And so just as my daughter needs to have right perspective when it comes to her headbands, so too must we when it comes to the area of plans, prosperity and pain.

It's not always easy though, is it? We need God's help. So let's pray that he would give it to us. Let's pray. Let's pray.