

An Eternal Perspective on Wealth & Suffering

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. It's great to see you all here. It's great to gather with you, both for those of you who are here physically present and for those of you who are on the live stream.

We continue to rejoice at the opportunities that God gives us to gather, whether in person or virtually, as is the best for you, for your safety and well-being. But it is always good to be with God's people. So thank you for being here. It's great to have you.

When I was 16, I went to the Rogers School of Driving. It was the driver's ed class that I had to take in order to get my learner's permit when I was in Pennsylvania. And at the Rogers School of Driving, there was the Rogers Rules of the Road. And I don't remember all of them, but I remember a few. One of them is leave yourself an out when you're driving on the highway or in a crowded area. Make sure you know you try to leave space so if you have to make an emergency maneuver, you know where you're going to go so you don't run into other cars. Another one was, this is sort of obvious, but look twice before you turn into oncoming traffic. But the one I remember the most clearly is actually this one. Aim high in steering. What this means is, and for those of you who are teenagers, this is really good advice, mark this down so you can hold it.

What it means is that when you're looking, you want to look not right in front of you, but you want to look down the road, 30, 50, 100 yards, to see where you're going. It helps you when you go around turns to do it smoothly rather than sharply. It helps you drive straight on the highway. If you look at the road right in front of you, you will weave back and forth like this the whole time. And when you don't look ahead, when you look down, you lack perspective, you lack the ability to anticipate challenges and trials that are going to come. And at worst, you will run off the road and die a fiery death. And we don't want that. So aim high in steering. This is your public service announcement for thriving. But I believe this is also good advice for us in life. It's so easy for us to get focused on the present. I just regained power after our storm yesterday afternoon.

And I know that much of my week was very focused on the present. What are we going to do today? How do I charge my phone? Where am I going to get food for me and my kids today? And that dominated my vision in ways that it's easy for us to do. It's easy for us to do that as we're in August looking ahead. Some of you may have had vacation or travel plans that you've put off hoping that they might happen. And now you're having to decide, do we do it? Do we not do it? Some of you are looking ahead to schooling decisions, whether it's for your kids or whether it's for yourself. And you're deciding, how do I do these things? And these are immediate things. And it's very easy to get focused on those things in trials and crises. Of course, the Bible has lots to say to us about this too. The Bible, there's a phrase that theologians use called eternal perspective.

[3 : 1 5] And it's the ability to lift our eyes from our present circumstances and present realities and to look up and to see the truth and the reality of who God is and what he has said is coming for us.

Because when we do that, it allows us to navigate the present difficulties and circumstances in a particularly fruitful way. This leads us, of course, to our passage this morning. We're continuing our study in the book of James. We're in James chapter 5, looking at verses 1 through 12. We're going to read this together and then pray. So will you pray? Let's read together if you want to turn with me there at home or here in the service on your phone or whichever, and then we will go ahead and read.

James 5, verse 1. Come now, you rich. Weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you. And the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned. You have murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.

Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it until it receives the early and the late rains.

You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged. Behold, the judge is standing at the door. As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we consider those blessed who remain steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

[5 : 59] But above all, brothers, 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. Let's pray together.

Lord, we thank you for this word, and we thank you for the ways that it challenges us, the way that it instructs us, and the way that it reminds us. Lord, I ask for your Holy Spirit to be at work this morning as we look into this passage together for the next few minutes. God, will you give us soft hearts?

Lord, will you convict us of sin? Will you lift our eyes, Lord, to see you more clearly and the promises of what this word gives to us? Lord, convict us, strengthen us, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. What good does it do to look down the road spiritually together? This passage has two things to say to us, two instructions that it gives us, and then we will look at the ground or the power by which we may follow through with this. So it breaks down into two sections, verses one through six is the first one, and in this we see James gives us a warning, a warning to the rich, and what he is saying to them is your present good will bring a future of disaster. Look at me. James comes right out of the gate in this particular passage like an Old Testament prophet, does he not? He is not pulling any punches. He is speaking very strongly, and of course the audience is a question. Commentators wonder, who is he speaking to exactly? Is he speaking to the church? Is he speaking to particularly wealthy people in the church?

Is he speaking to those outside the church? Certainly in the first century there was a cultural pattern of landowners who owned much property and had great power as well as wealth, and it seems that that may be James' primary audience, not within the church. He doesn't call them brothers or sisters. He calls them, he doesn't address them in that way, and yet may we have ears to hear for ourselves as well. We'll explore that as we go on. James comes right out of the gate. He says, misery is in your future.

[8 : 46] The things that you are investing in, the things that you are hoarding, the things that you are doing that you think are going to be building a good life for yourself, in fact will bring only misery.

Why is this? First of all, because the treasures that you are investing in are worthless. The cloth and the garments, the rich fabrics that were really valuable in the first century, even more so than today, although I suppose if you go spend \$5,000 on an Armani suit, it's similar.

They're not going to last. The cloth will rot. The moths will eat holes in it. He says, even your gold and silver will corrode, and for those of you who are scientists, you know gold and silver can't corrode. It doesn't rust. That's the whole point of them being precious metals, is they can last forever. And yet, what he says is, even these things are going to turn to dust.

They're going to become worthless. They're going to be as valuable as the food that sat in my fridge all week. Good only worth throwing out. And they will bear witness. They will bear witness in a final courtroom of where you have invested your time and your energy and where you have put your heart and your security. And so, James is saying, woe to you rich, because your investment in those things, for those of you who invest in those things, recognize that what you're investing in ultimately will be worthless. Now look, we need to recognize having wealth, having resources is not an inherently sinful thing. It is not bad to have those things necessarily, but it is what we do with them that is important. And here, what we see is hoarding, seeking security in those things, and being self-centered, using them for our selfish desires. Self-indulgence and luxury are the words that are used. Spending it all on ourselves rather than thinking about others. And when we use things like this, we are being foolish, and James warns us that our future is not good. The end will not be what we desire. But for these rich that James is looking at, it's more than just poor investment.

It is also because their self-indulgence is fitting them for judgment, because they are abusing others around them for in the pursuit of and in the spending of their wealth and power. This is what verse 3 is about, the day laborers, the wages. Remember the parable that Jesus tells about the workers in the vineyard? They come for a day, and some come at 9, and some come at 12, and some come at 3, and they're all paid at the end. And some of you may know this. It's because they need to get paid at the end of the day so that they can feed their family that day. They're getting food for their work that day. And these people, these rich, have withheld that money. They have said, no, I will not give it to you today, and maybe I will never give it to you. And they've abused their power, likely to enforce unfair and oppressive terms upon their workers.

[12 : 20] They're mowers, they're harvesters, they've withheld their wages from it. And in the end, they've not only done that, but in verse 6, it shows us that they have actively pursued the condemnation of those who have sought to do right. James doesn't explain to us a lot, but what we do see clearly is that the greed of these people have driven them to use their power to destroy innocent lives.

The righteous are suffering. Those who seek to do good and who are not resisting are being taken advantage of. For them, the future is misery.

It is not a good thing. One commentator says, as thinking about riches for all of us, it says, there's no sin in being rich where sin exists among the rich.

It arises, the sin arises, that is, from the manner in which the wealth was acquired, the spirit which it tends to engender in the heart, and the way it is used.

So this is the question we need to ask ourselves. How have we acquired wealth that we do have? What spirit has it cultivated in our hearts?

[13 : 49] And how are we using it? For friends, we need to be honest. Even for some of us in this room who have struggled financially, we are wealthy compared to many in the world.

We live in a wealthy culture. And God has called us to have a stewardship before him of what we have. And so we need to ask ourselves a series of questions.

Have we put our hope in our earthly treasures, whether they be our money, our position, our power? Have we trusted in our IRAs and our 401ks, or even in our bank accounts and our savings?

It's not bad to have those things, but are we trusting in them? Is that where our hope is? Are we living a life of luxury and self-indulgence, meeting our own selfish desires while ignoring the needs of those around us?

Are we using our power, our economic power, to defraud or shortchange others? I'm from New England. I get it. We like to be thrifty.

[15 : 04] We like a deal. We like to get a good bargain. There's nothing wrong with that. But sometimes we can do that at the expense of others, rather than having a generous spirit.

We need to be careful with that. I've been struck during this pandemic about the plight of those who work in the food service industry, those who are delivering, those who are working.

Are we being overly generous with those who are in vulnerable positions economically because of that? Have you tipped your drivers, your delivery person, your servers more during this time to help them get through?

If you have the ability to do so. Then we need to ask ourselves, have we attacked or belittled righteous people when in their righteousness they've impinged upon us, where their sacrifice has made us feel guilty?

Have we disparaged them rather than praising them for the way that they've cared for others? Finally, are we participating in societal systems that perpetuate harm to the poor?

[16 : 21] This is a broad and complex question. It's not the point of our sermon today. But it is a question that we must grapple with in our day and age. How are we being conscious of how our society works and how we can be proactively fighting against the cultivation of this kind of riches and these kinds of attitudes in our world?

So James starts with this warning to the rich and then he moves on. And there's a shift. There's a shift in audience for sure and a shift in tone in verse 7. As he looks then to his church, to his brothers and sisters.

And in James' world, probably these people were those who were suffering under the oppression of the rich. Many of them. And many of them were the ones who were actually being mistreated by the rich.

And he turns to them and he says, Be patient, brothers and sisters, and endure. He says, be patient like a farmer who works really hard.

He goes out and he plows the field and he pulls up the rocks and he pulls up the weeds and he plants the seed and he waters the seed and he pulls the weeds again and he watches it. And he does all of this work knowing that he cannot make his crop grow.

[17 : 43] He does all of this work patiently waiting for God to provide the late rains and the early rains, which in Palestine meant the fall rains that would begin the crop and the spring rains that would come at the end of the time that would bring a bountiful harvest in Palestine.

And the farmer knows that with all of his work, his patience is trusting and waiting on the Lord to provide what only he can do. Patience is the focus in this.

Patience is the focus in this. And he's encouraging these suffering saints to be patient as in God's timing we look for vindication, for relief, for deliverance from our situation.

He goes on in verse 8 and he says, Establish your hearts. The patience that he calls on is not a laying back on your bed, weeping and moaning and doing nothing. It is a proactive patience.

So here, establish your hearts. This word is used in Luke 9, 51, when Jesus turns his face towards Jerusalem.

[18 : 58] It's the same idea. This steely determination as Jesus turns his face to Jerusalem in Luke so that he's going to the cross. Here, James uses that word to say, You, brothers and sisters, in the face of the hardship that you are facing, dig in, establish yourself.

Like Jim Cantore when he's like in the hurricane winds. And he's like, here comes a big gust. And he sets his feet so that when the blast comes, he can stand firm. This is what God wants us to do with our hearts before him.

James says, remember the prophets of old. Remember Jeremiah who was told, Go preach to a people who will not listen. And Jeremiah, for his whole life, preached.

Preached against the injustice that he saw. Preached against the ungodliness that was in the people of God. And preached knowing from the very start that people would not repent and would not turn in his day.

By all modern metrics of ministry, he was a great failure. But in God's economy, he's held up as an example of faithful, patient, endurance, and steadfastness.

[20 : 16] And even more so, James says, think of Job. The righteous man for whom he lost humanly everything. And in his loss and in his suffering, again, his patience was not simply, well, I guess that's the way it is.

He went to God and he railed against God. And he pleaded with God to explain and to give him good reason and to understand. And he sought freedom from condemnation for it.

But in his patience, he continued to seek God and to wait for God's answer. And when God did answer him, he said, Now I see.

Not now I understand everything, but now I see God. And I repent. This is the kind of endurance. This is the kind of steadfastness.

This is the kind of patience that James is encouraging. And he laces in it a couple of behavioral commands for us too. Don't grumble against one another.

[21 : 27] Have you ever noticed that when it gets really hard, how easy it is to begin to pick at the people who are with you in the suffering? How easy it is to criticize others who don't respond exactly the way you do.

How easy it is to disagree with others who don't do the same thing that you want them to. How easy it is for us to criticize and attack one another in the midst of suffering.

James says, Don't do that, lest you be judged, for the judge is coming. And then in verse 12, which is a verse that is challenging to figure out how it fits into this.

And it has a broader application that Jesus brings out in other parts of the Gospels about this. Not swearing on anything because you should be before God a man or a woman of integrity who when you say yes, you mean yes.

And when you say no, you mean no. And you don't have to swear on any other authority other than your own integrity. But here I think James may be applying it specifically to those people who are tenant farmers, who are under pressure from these landowners, who may be facing a great pressure to make promises to try to get out of the heat of this unjust oppression.

[22 : 48] I imagine this scene translated into the 20th century into a movie like Goodfellas. Paulie, I'll get you the money, I swear. I swear on my mother's grave.

I'll get it to you next week. Here, it's going to come. That this is the kind of oath that James is saying, You don't have to make that. You don't have to swear on your mother's grave.

Just let your yes be yes and your no be no before injustice. And in the face of the trials that you're facing, don't allow them to warp you away from being the kind of person who has integrity.

Because the Lord is coming. And how do we apply this patient endurance to our own lives?

Well, we need to recognize that the trials we're going through are meant to be responded to with passive, not with passive inactivity, but active faith and pursuit of the Lord.

[23 : 57] Some of you may be facing crises of health. Some of you have had crises of health that are chronic and ongoing and difficult. Some of you may be facing present economic circumstances and challenges.

Some of you may be facing loss of jobs or of loved ones. How do we pursue following this instruction in light of that?

You know, I think of one of the great examples of the most extreme circumstances. The book, *The Miracle on the River Kwai*.

If you haven't read it, it's by a man named Ernest Gordon. And he was a POW in Southeast Asia in World War II during the Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia.

He was a soldier who was captured and taken to one of the prison camps on the labor camps where they were building roads through Southeast Asia. And he walked in and he saw a place that was full of despair and death.

[25 : 09] The soldiers were brutally mistreated. Dehumanized. He came in and he saw that he had a choice.

He could either believe that God was with him in there and to choose to pursue patiently waiting for God and steadfastly doing what is right or he could give in to selfish indulgence and simply live for himself and try to survive.

He chose the first, not the second. He saw his mates die. He saw them beaten. But his unshakable hope kept him going.

And he brought life. He would suffer at times for showing acts of kindness. When he was forbidden to share food with others, he would do it anyways, even when it meant beatings or solitary confinement.

And as he waited and as he prayed, how long, O Lord, and looked to deliverance, he lived with active patience, loving in the meantime, seeking to do good while he could.

[26 : 24] Friends, this is a great example in the most extreme circumstances. And so for us, as we experience lesser trials, like power outages or the inconvenience of COVID-19 restrictions, or as we face greater circumstances, like ongoing racial prejudice and inequality, or the persecution of the church in parts of the world, let us stand fast.

Let us be active in faith and patient in endurance. But as we hear these commands, these warnings to the rich, and this encouragement to the faithful, I don't know about you, but I can become very weary and think, I don't know if I can do that.

I don't know how to press on. But friends, this is where Roger's rules of driving help. Lift up your eyes. Look to the end.

For this passage is laced with a reminder that though our present circumstances are hard, the Lord is at hand.

In verse 8, it says, the Lord is at hand. In verse 9, it says, the Lord is standing at the door. We saw it in verse 9, where it says that there is a judge who is coming.

[27 : 52] We saw it in verse 3 and 4, where it says, there is a day of slaughter coming. And there is a Lord of hosts who is coming to vindicate the righteous.

So over and over and over again in this passage, we see that in the context of these commands, there is this reminder again and again and again. The future, in the future, the Lord will come.

In fact, the last days mean not just a future day, but mean now. It's not merely a chronological term. It's a salvation historical term.

The last days were begun when Jesus came and through his life and death and resurrection, accomplished the redemption that God is now working out in the world.

And these last days, from his resurrection to his return again, is what we are living in now. And the Bible consistently says, be ready for his coming.

[28 : 53] Wait for his coming. Look for his coming. Because when it comes, it will be the end. And it will be a glorious thing. He will come as a judge.

And he will judge the rich who wickedly oppress others and deny God and use their wealth and power for selfish gain. They will get their recompense and their future will be one of misery.

But he will also come as a deliverer. And so you, brothers and sisters, who have placed your hope in him, you, brothers and sisters, who know that you are his, when he comes, he will judge us for our actions.

And so we are called to be faithful. But he will ultimately deliver us. Verse 11 says, for you know the purpose of the Lord, his compassion, and his mercy.

Friends, this is the good news of the gospel that gives us hope in the midst of present circumstances by looking ahead. It gives us hope that we have this kind of Savior talked about in Isaiah 53, speaking prophetically of Jesus to come.

[30 : 11] He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth. Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter and like a sheep that is before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.

By oppression and judgment, he was taken away. And as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off, who considered he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people?

Or think of the words of the Apostle Paul, for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich in heaven, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

For Christ also suffered, Peter says, once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God. Friends, this is the compassion and the mercy of God that he has shown such a great love for us and for this world in Christ.

He has accomplished a redemption for us that is beyond belief. And so, it gives us a warning for us to not put our hope in this life. And it gives us the power to endure the hardships of our present circumstances as we look forward to this redemption that is to come.

[31 : 30] Friends, I'm going to close with words from this commentator, Alec Mottier, who wrote this, behind all that God has ever done for us, lies his heart of love, behind his choice of us, his gift of his son, the temporal and eternal blessings of his great salvation, his daily and nightly care for us, his provisions for body, mind, and soul, his presence day by day, and the hope of glory.

The wonder of the day of Christ coming is that then the full content of that heart of love will come home in experience to the people of this great and tender-hearted God.

And so, as we pursue this life of knowing God, as we pursue it in the midst of sufferings and trials and hardships, know that there is a God of love, a God of mercy and of compassion, and that in the future when he comes, that will reign on this earth forever.

May this be a warning to our selfish hearts and an encouragement to us to continue to trust in him. Let's pray. Lord, thank you for this word.

Thank you for the good news that Jesus has accomplished and Jesus will return to fulfill his redemption. Lord, that you will make the world new and that evil and sin will end and injustice will end.

[33 : 20] Lord, that righteousness will roll and that the sweetness and the beauty of your love and mercy will be that which rules the day in your new creation.

God, give us hope. Give us confidence in these things and that you will come and that you will do them and help us to live today in light of that future.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.