

Corrupt Riches and Patient Waiting

James 5:1-8

Introduction

As we continue to chip our way through the book of James, we continue to remind ourselves of the opening charge: “My brethren, count it all joy when you encounter various trials” (1:2). James calls to let patience, that is, waiting on the Lord’s timing through the trial, to have its maturing work. To wait patiently, one must have hope that there is an answer or solution, that there is a deliverance coming. In other words, there must be something for which to wait patiently. In this passage, James reminds his readers that there is a deliverance and vindication coming, urging them to stand fast while they wait.

Walk Through the Text

Most of the letter has been clearly addressed to the believing Jews scattered abroad (1:1). Now, James takes on a tone like an OT prophet (or Jesus Himself; cf. Matt. 23) and addresses those who are persecuting believers from positions of wealth and power. The primary target is likely the unbelieving Jews. James gives a dire warning of miseries coming upon them (v. 1). Their wealth they have acquired and relied on is corrupted (cf. Matt. 6:19), and because they have not used it to bless but rather to oppress the decay witnesses against them (vs. 2-3). There are four accusations against them: first, they have laid up their treasure in the last days (v. 3; cf. Luke 12:16-21, 40, 56). Second, they have withheld wages from their workers, and the cries of the abused have reached the Lord of armies (v. 4). Third, they have lived extravagantly, like animals fattening themselves for the slaughter (v. 5; cf. Phil. 3:18-19). Fourth, they have condemned and murdered the just, who does not resist, either because of his faithfulness or poverty (v. 6). James then turns back to the believers, reminding them to wait on the Lord patiently, like a farmer who waits for the precious fruit (v. 7). They should stand fast because their vindication and deliverance will come soon (v. 8).

Corrupt Riches

Scripture gives many warnings about the danger to the soul that wealth can bring (Matt. 19:23, 1 Tim. 6:9-10). Wealth in itself is not evil (e.g., Deut. 8:18), but it can turn men away from trusting the Lord (Matt. 6:24). Men also will use it to oppress the poor and oppose the gospel. These rich people have specifically withheld wages earned by those they have hired, which is an injustice God detests and strictly forbids (Mal. 3:5, Lev. 19:13, Deut. 24:14-15). We are to love our neighbors by paying for work promptly and justly.

Many commentators agree that the primary audience James has in view for this prophetic diatribe are the Jews persecuting the church (condemning and murdering the just). With this in mind, we could also see that James is here alluding to something more than just economic oppression. Jesus several times compared the spreading of the gospel to field work (e.g., Matt. 9:37-38, 13:3). Paul also described the work of evangelism as plowing and sowing (1 Cor. 3:6-9). The workers of v. 4 may also refer to the apostles and pastors and evangelists who labored in the fields Jesus spoke of, who were persecuted for their faith, and who were crying out to the Lord of Armies for deliverance (Meyers). James in his

prophetic role makes a strong case against these persecutors, having identified two witnesses (their corroded wealth and the cries of the laborers) against them (Deut. 19:15).

The Last Days and the Coming of the Lord

Sometimes in Scripture, the last day(s) and the coming of the Lord clearly refer to the final judgment and the second personal coming of Christ (e.g., John 6:54, John 11:24; 1 Cor. 15:23ff). Other times, these phrases refer to other periods of time in history (e.g., Acts 2:17, Heb. 1:2; Is. 19:1, Matt. 24:27-35). On the one hand, there is value in seeing “the last days” here as speaking of the final judgment. The material wealth stockpiled by the wicked will do them no good when they face the Judge of all the earth. However, assuming the last days of v. 3 and the coming of v. 8 refer to the same thing, we should note that James says that time is “at hand.” Often, this is interpreted to refer to the fact that we do not know when Christ will return (Matt. 24:36), and so the Lord and the apostles urged Christians to live always ready for it. While this principle does have merit, if we simply generalize that time marker, we miss an important point. Jesus had clearly prophesied that the Temple would be destroyed within a generation, and that event would bring an end to those Jews who had been persecuting the church. James writes to those persecuted Christians, reminding them that the God of vengeance (Ps. 94:1) had promised to come and deliver them from these enemies. We should remember that God acts *in* history and not just at the end of it, as seen in Scripture and through history (Meyers).

With this in mind, we also should take note of the timescale James uses. While the coming is “at hand,” James writes around thirty years (taking an early dating) before the destruction of the Temple finally happens. So, while there is a real encouragement to these believers to trust in God’s promises and timing, there is still a lot of patient waiting for them.

Patient Waiting

Again, James makes a strong case against these rich, and he reminds the believers of the vindication to come. In the meantime, though, they should have the disposition of a farmer. The faithful farmer plows, sows, waters, tends...and waits. He does much work, but he also knows that God brings the increase (1 Cor. 3:9). “Every reference to “early and later rains” in the OT occurs in a context affirming the faithfulness of the Lord (Deut. 11:14; Jer. 5:24; Hos. 6:3; Joel 2:23; Zech. 10:1)” (Moo). Christians often wait, but wait in expectant hope.

Conclusion

We find ourselves in some ways in a similar situation. Would we not love to see God move and deal with the murder of the unborn, the oppression of the orphan and widow, the tax codes that promote fatherlessness, the taxes that oppress faithful businesses, etc.? James’ encouragement is to wait patiently. This does not mean to wait and do nothing. But we are to be like the farmer—plowing, sowing, tending, etc.—doing the faithful work God has called us to do, instead of turning and acting like the world when they want to see change happen. And of course the same is true in your own particular trials. God is at work. He is the Lord of Armies. He is the God of Vengeance. He is the Giver of every good gift, including your particular circumstance. And He also gives you the strength to count it all joy as He continues to strengthen and perfect you for the glory He has in store.