



“A Prophetic Apostrophe”

(James 5:1-9)

No. 15 in the series • August 5, 2018

Cornerstone Bible Church • Lilburn, Georgia

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For our ministry of the word this morning I want to direct your attention to the opening verses of James chapter 5. This is where the main body of the letter comes to a conclusion, and the rest of chapter 5 is really a collection of parting shots that James gives to address issues that may have been directed to him by these Judean churches that he is writing. But here at the opening of chapter 5 he goes out with a bang, aiming some very severe language at people he identifies as the rich who have made the mistake of abusing the poor to acquire their wealth.

Speaking of which, I read this week of the rather remarkable practice of one of the wealthiest sheiks of the Middle East. The country was not identified, but it might apply to any number of places in that oil-rich region. It seems that one sheik had more money than he could spend, and in spite of the fact that there are many tens of thousands of desperately poor people in his country, he had developed the practice of buying Rolls-Royces quite frequently. Someone looked into it, and came to find out that he would buy a new Rolls which, as you won't have any trouble imagining, comes with a full tank of gas. Then he would drive it until the gas gave out, when he would leave it on the side of the road and buy another which would be promptly delivered to him with another full tank of gas.

Unfortunately, some great fortunes have been built on dishonesty, fraud, and oppression, and that motivates James to reach out and touch the group that he addresses in these first ten verses of James 5. Follow along with me as I read the text for us this morning.

SCRIPTURE: JAMES 5:1-9

*1 Come now, you rich people: “Weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you!
2 Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. 3 Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days. 4 Indeed the wages of the laborers who*

mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Hosts. 5 You have lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury; you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter. 6 You have condemned, you have murdered the just; he does not resist you.”

7 Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. 8 You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. 9 Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be judged. Behold the Judge: he has taken his stand at the door!

TO WHOM ARE THE WARNINGS OF JAMES 5:1-6 ADDRESSED?

Right away we see that, before we get too far into the meaning of the passage, we do have to ask and answer a significant question: to whom are the warnings of verses 1-6 addressed? Even a cursory survey of the commentary literature will reveal that there is room for disagreement about this. And the question is terrifically important, as it is with most passages of Scripture.

The importance of the question

It's important for two reasons. First...

All application depends on it

Not all Scripture is addressed to the general public. Often, as here, specific groups are identified as particularly the target of what follows. And if you get it wrong here, you might be addressing severe language at people who really are not the object of the writer's intention.

I remember many years ago a member of our church came to me very troubled. He brought my attention to a passage of Scripture that he had read, and he said that he was sure that as a church we were paying no attention to it and we were in fact disobedient to it. The passage he pointed out to me was Exodus 12:14, which says, “*So this day [of the Passover] shall be to you a memorial; and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord throughout your generations. You shall keep it as a feast by an everlasting ordinance.*” To his way of thinking, the Passover was something that we should have been observing right from the beginning because it was always intended to be continued. It was “an everlasting ordinance.”

But of course he had overlooked the preceding paragraph that led into verse 14. There Moses was told, “*Speak to all the congregation of Israel...*” and then the instructions for the Passover followed. I had to explain to him that we were not the congregation of Israel, and that helped. It also helped when I let him know that the Lord's Table that we do celebrate regularly was adapted from the Passover celebration and did in fact fulfill the Passover's purpose as a picture of the death of the true Lamb of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. As far as I could tell, his concerns were dealt with simply by pointing out to whom the passage was addressed. Sometimes that is obvious. At other times, as here, not so much.

And the question is also important for a second reason, namely, that...

All application is by analogy

Here we sit in the twenty-first century, separated from the original readers of James by two thousand years of history and by ten thousand miles of space and even greater barriers of culture. He didn't write these words directly to us, but he did write to people who share certain important things in common with us, especially that we love and follow the same Lord he did. So, as 2 Timothy 3:16 reminds us, all Scripture is *for* us even if it is not addressed directly *to* us. We apply it by analogy.

But that turns out to be difficult in James 5. To whom is James writing? He's very clear on the point. Verse 1 identifies them as *rich people*. But which rich people? Are they rich Christians who are part of the Jewish churches that James is writing? Or are they rich people in the communities of Judea who oppress the poor, including the Christian poor, those poor who attend the churches that James is writing?

The answer to the question

Not the easiest question to answer, but I think the evidence lines up much easier for the latter answer. James is addressing outsiders—the rich oppressors of the people in James's Judean churches.

Why do I arrive at this answer? Let me give you four reasons that I think more or less force us to that conclusion.

Support for the answer

First of all, I want you to notice...

1. The shift to *brethren* in verse 7

Back in 4:11, James addresses his readers as *brethren*. Then, at the opening of chapter 5, you have six verses addressed to *the rich*, then in verse 7 James returns to the original readers and says, "*Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord.*" The natural way to understand the passage is that those six opening verses of chapter 5 is a sort of side conversation with a new group.

But perhaps more important is the second reason. Beginning at verse 7, James calls attention to...

2. The comforts of the second coming

He urges the brethren to be patient until the coming of the Lord when all their questions will be answered and their hopes realized. That contrasts very sharply with his severe language in the first six verses. For the rich, the second coming will not be a time of comfort but a time of pain and misery. He says in verse 1, "*Weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you! Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days.*" For the rich, the last days are not welcome ones. They have bet on the wrong horse.

For the brethren, he says in verse 8, "*Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.*" That's a comfort, not a cause for fear. It's hard to see how the second coming can be both a source of misery and a source for encouragement for the same people at the same time. That makes it virtually impossible that the two groups are the same. He warns

the rich oppressors about the second coming, which will be a source of pain and misery for them, but he comforts the brethren by references to the same event. Notice also...

3. The rich are described in terms that can only apply to unbelievers

He points to coming miseries in verse 1, then in verse 5 says to the rich, “*You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter*” (vs 5). Popular culture teaches that when Jesus returns the unbelievers of the world will stand before him in judgment, but that is a myth. The real danger to unbelievers at the second coming is physical death. The earth will be heavily depopulated by the physical judgments that are part of the second coming. It is indeed to be a day of slaughter for unbelievers.

For believers, by contrast, it is a day of rescue and joy as both those who have died in Christ and those who are still alive will be resurrected, transformed, and glorified as the Lord returns to the earth in triumph. No slaughter threatens them, only vindication.

And finally, a fourth support for the view I am teaching this morning...

4. Verses 1-6 represent a figure of speech known as an *apostrophe*

Don't think in terms of the punctuation mark. An *apostrophe* is a very common figure of speech in Scripture which the leading authority defines as, “a turning aside from the direct subject-matter to address others.”¹

A distinction

Apostrophes are common in the psalms, but especially common in the prophets. And in fact, James 5:1-6 reads very much like something you might find in Isaiah or Jeremiah. Sometimes God will indict his own people for their idolatry, and then, without any warning at all, he will (so to speak) turn from speaking to them and address the nations that he plans to use in punishing Israel. The book of Habakkuk is more or less organized around an apostrophe.

God addresses the nations so that Israel can see that their oppressors are going to have to answer for their crimes. Apostrophes serve a dramatic purpose; they are analogous to the changing scenes of a play. They fulfill the oppressed person's desire to be a fly on the wall at the punishment of those who oppress him.

An example: Jeremiah 5:9-10

A good example appears in Jeremiah 5:9-10. God speaks to Jeremiah about Judah and says to him, “*Shall I not punish [Jerusalem] for these things?*” declares the Lord; “*and shall I not avenge myself on a nation such as this?*” Then, in the next verse, with no warning at all, he turns to the armies of Babylon and says, “*Go up through her vine rows and destroy, but make not a full end; strip away her branches, for they are not the Lord's.*”

Apostrophes are often abrupt like that. And there are no marginal notes in the actual text to tell you you have found one. The context is the only thing that gives it away. The liberal use of apostrophes sometimes makes the prophets hard to read, but as long as you recognize them, these books make very good sense. But the question also has to be asked...

WHY EMPLOY AN APOSTROPHE?

You may ask, “What is the point of addressing people who aren’t present?” Part of the answer is drama. It is a way of focusing attention powerfully on the group in question. God holds the enemy of the faithful up before them and shines a powerful light of judgment on the oppressor. It is highly likely that most of the people in these Judean churches had suffered at the hands of the oppressing rich. How does God feel about that? Is he content to just let them get by with it all? No! Their day is coming. So the apostrophe is given...

To encourage those who are oppressed

The people who are addressed in the first six verses of chapter 5 were the oppressors of the Christians to whom this letter was written. These poor believers in the Judean churches may think that their prayers to God for justice have been ignored. They haven’t been ignored. God has heard them all. He is now putting the rich oppressors on notice that they will be held accountable for their indifference to the people they have mistreated.

James turns to them to say: “You think you have pulled a fast one on the Lord, but don’t count on it. You are going to find that the wealth you gained through the blood of the poor is going to disappoint you. And you will have to answer to God for your callousness.” James even calls God “the Lord of armies” to indicate his hostility to what they have done.

At the same time, the apostrophe is also designed...

To teach believers to fix their hopes in the second coming

When he turns back to his readers, he says to them, “*Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be patient.*”

Are believers ever going to be fully satisfied by the course of this age? No. We are strangers here. We don’t belong here. Peter says this explicitly in chapter 2 of his first letter: “*Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation*” (2:11-12). We are sojourners and pilgrims. The world speaks against us as a bunch of evildoers. Do you find that bizarre? It certainly looks that way to me.

I think it felt very much that way to these Christians of Judea. They were poor and the authorities in Jerusalem were looking for them, to arrest them. They wanted to make examples of them and use them to discourage anybody who might want to think about becoming followers of Jesus, the one that the authorities themselves had rejected. You’d think they had better things to do, but no—they were out for blood.

And even when those persecuted poor Christians tried to be responsible and earn a living for their families, the rich oppressors of the world fraudulently refused to pay them the wages they had earned. Again, why? Because they didn’t belong here. But God had not forgotten them. So James tells them to be patient. But of course, that’s easier said

than done. And if it was hard then, it's even more so now, because so much time has passed since James said, "Be patient."

What are we to think about this long delay? The Lord promised to return, but now two thousand years have gone by. What are we to make of the long wait? When James told his readers to be patient, he was probably writing only about five or ten years after the ascension of Jesus. And when he addressed the oppressive rich he told them that they had been accumulating goods in the last days. Let me just give you four points that help shed some light on why we still today need to be patient until the coming of the Lord. First...

The last days began on the Day of Pentecost

It was then, as those early Christians began to prophesy right in the heart of Jerusalem, that Peter explained what was going on. He said, "*This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'And IT SHALL COME TO PASS IN THE LAST DAYS, says God, that I will pour out of my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams'*" (Acts 2:16-17). So when James says that the rich had accumulated wealth in the last days, he wasn't guessing. He knew what he was talking about. What happened on the Day of Pentecost inaugurated this world's last days.

The last days are still with us. In fact, the world has been living on borrowed time ever since the Day of Pentecost. But why have the last days been extended to so long a time? All we can say for sure is that...

The delay was anticipated in the Lord's teaching

The Lord once told a parable about wise and foolish virgins—these were bridesmaids whose responsibility it was to greet the bridegroom as he came to the wedding feast—and the two groups prepared for the occasion differently. "*As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him'*" (Matt. 25:5-6). The bridegroom in the parable, of course, is Jesus. He was delayed in his coming, and that is indeed what has happened until now. So, disciples are encouraged to be wise and not to make the mistake of saying, "He has delayed his coming; therefore he isn't coming at all."

These kinds of references to the delay in the second coming are sprinkled through the gospels. But there is one very frontal and definite statement about the delay that no one can simply work around. It is found in Matthew 24:14, where Jesus says, "*This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.*" The sooner the work of the great commission is done, the sooner the Lord will return. He will return then, but not before. So there has always been a delay in place and it is still there. The task has not been completed yet.

Let me be quick to clarify something. The mere idea of a "delay" involves looking at things from the human point of view. There is no delay from God's standpoint. The Father has always known when the second coming would take place. The date has always been fixed with him, and it still is.

But from our point of view it looks as though it is delayed. That really doesn't matter. We are still to make the return of Christ the focus of our hopes. Nothing short of his return

will fix what is wrong with this world. So every exhortation to stay alert because we don't know when he is coming is still as applicable as it ever was. And there is another critical point...

The delay is in the interests of the human race

In 2 Peter 3:9, Peter explains why. He says, "*The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some count slackness, but is patient toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.*" The more time that passes before the second coming, the more people have an opportunity to put their trust in Christ. Basically 2 Peter 3:9 tells us why the gospel had to be preached first. In Matthew 24:14, we learn that there is work to be done that has to be finished before the second coming can take place. In 2 Peter 3:9 we learn why that work is so important. God is being gracious, allowing the message of the gospel to be preached throughout the world before he brings down the curtain on history as we know it. So the delay is no surprise, and it is in the interests of the human race that there be one.

At the same time, James says, nobody knows when the time will be up, so he impresses us with the urgency of keeping our hope central to us, because...

The delay is pictured in verse 10

Notice how dramatically he expresses the situation in verse 10: "*Behold the Judge: he has taken his stand at the door!*" I have been in a few courtrooms in my time, and I've always been impressed how solemn they become right before the judge emerges from his chambers. Nothing can happen in that courtroom until the judge appears. He has to walk through the door leading into the courtroom. When he does, you hear "All rise!" And everybody stands up. Then the judge ascends the bench, and the trial starts. What James tells us here is that the judge, the Lord Jesus Christ, has taken his stand on the other side of the door. All that remains is for the door to open, and all the heartaches and injustices of the world we live in will be addressed.

So what are we to do until then? He tells us in verse 8: "*Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.*" What does he mean by that? He means that we are to take God's promises seriously and strengthen ourselves for whatever delay may ensue. We build whatever supports of Scripture we need to fix our hearts firmly in the place of patience and hope. We don't fix our hopes on improving this age, though we do what we can to make the world a better place. We recognize that oppressions will take place and this world will not always be friendly toward us. But in God's good timing and not before, the Lord will return and set everything right.

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I. Bullinger, E. W., *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*. Accordance electronic ed. London: Messrs. Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1898.