

The unfolding of your words gives light.

Faith That Works

An Exposition of the Book of James

¹Come now, you rich^a, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you^b. ²Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten^c. ³Your gold and your silver have rusted^d; and their rust will be a witness against you and will

^a 5:1 **Come now, you rich.** The only other time the words translated “come now” are used in the New Testament is in the last chapter (4:13) when James is addressing people who make plans without God. Perhaps James is using it as an expression of disgust like we might groan and say, “Ahh, come on!” This one begins a section that first rebukes wealthy people and then encourages oppressed people.

Elsewhere James was not easy on the rich of his day:

But the brother of humble circumstances is to glory in his high position; and the rich man is to glory in his humiliation, because like flowering grass he will pass away. For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away. James 1:9-11

But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called? James 2:6-7

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit. James 4:13

But we should not be so blind as to miss the modern target of this rebuke. How should we identify the “rich people” James addresses here? Certainly by first century standards there are very few modern Americans who could be classified as anything other than rich. But James does not just identify the “rich” by their wealth. This specific class hoarded wealth, kept it at the expense of employees and engaged in the oppression of innocent people.

Was James supposing that the class of people he addresses would be among the readers of this epistle? It is possible that within the professing Church there are and have always been wealthy people guilty of this type of sin. However James may have been using the same technique as the psalmists who addressed evildoers as a means of comforting the downtrodden (“Away from me, you bloodthirsty men,” Psalm 139:19; “in your heart you devise injustice,” Psalm 58:2).

^b 5:1 **weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you.** The word translated “howl” (*ololuzontes*) is a word like “buzz” that sounds like what it is. The words “weep and “howl” picture those who are being judged.

^c 5:2 **Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten.** First century standards of wealth were primarily measured by agricultural products, clothing and precious metals. You can see that James addresses the demise of all three. James had evidently been present when his Lord and half-brother warned people (Matthew 6:19-21) to lay up treasure in heaven where moth and rust do not corrupt and where thieves do not break in and steal. Luke 12:31-34 records Jesus counseling his disciples about the use of wealth in his kingdom:

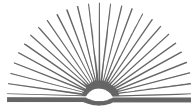
But seek His kingdom, and these things will be added to you. Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves money belts which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

^d 5:3 **Your gold and your silver have rusted.** James was not unaware of the way precious metals resist corrosion. His point is that they do not last.

James 5.01-06
Steven Svendsen, Sr.

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consume your flesh like fire^a. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure^b! Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you^c; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth^d. ⁵You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure^e; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter^f. ⁶You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you^{g,h}

^a 5:3 **their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire.** This is a very disturbing picture—and may refer to a judgment on unbelievers after this life—but likely is used symbolically of the end of people who rely on riches being the same as their riches.

^b 5:3 **It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure.** The mention of “last days” is possibly a reference to the coming destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans that occurred in A. D. 70.

^c 5:4 **Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you.** This is an imaginative word picture, wages crying out. James is referring to related commandments in Torah that spring from the command not to steal:

You shall not oppress your neighbor, nor rob him. The wages of a hired man are not to remain with you all night until morning. Leviticus 19:13

You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your countrymen or one of your aliens who is in your land in your towns. You shall give him his wages on his day before the sun sets, for he is poor and sets his heart on it; so that he will not cry against you to the LORD and it become sin in you. Deuteronomy 24:14-15

You see that Deuteronomy speaks of the worker crying out to God and James speaks of the wages crying out. The same technique was used by God when he told Cain that Abel's blood was crying out to Him from the ground (Genesis 4:10). God is not deaf to prayers of the oppressed or blind to the oppression itself. Two or three witnesses are required by God to demonstrate to truth of a matter. Rotting riches take the stand to testify against the rich.

^d 5:4 **the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.** This is the Lord of armies, the one whom David warned Goliath he should not defy.

^e 5:5 **You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure.** Hedonism is not new to our age but we are perfecting it.

^f 5:5 **you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.** The picture is a great harvest of meat benefitting the harvesters. Trouble is, the meal comes at the expense of the weak who have been harvested.

^g 5:6 **You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you.** The righteous man either could do nothing about his sentence or he refused to take revenge because he was righteous.

^h 5:1-6 The practical applications of this text may appear difficult on the surface, but the passage does apply to us for two reasons. First: We live in a time of wealth unparalleled in human history. Second: We live in a nation that is ripe for judgment. How, then should we view our material resources?

1. Do not count on them to last. Even gold gets “rusty” eventually.
2. Do not count on them to satisfy. Ask the fellow who “has it all” if he wants anything else.
3. Do not use them to oppress or control others. God takes care of the weak. Do not get in his way.
4. Do not think they have been given to you to use on yourself. The strong have great responsibility as they see the weak ones around them.

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