

Be Prosperous, Be Healed!

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James 5:1-20 ESV

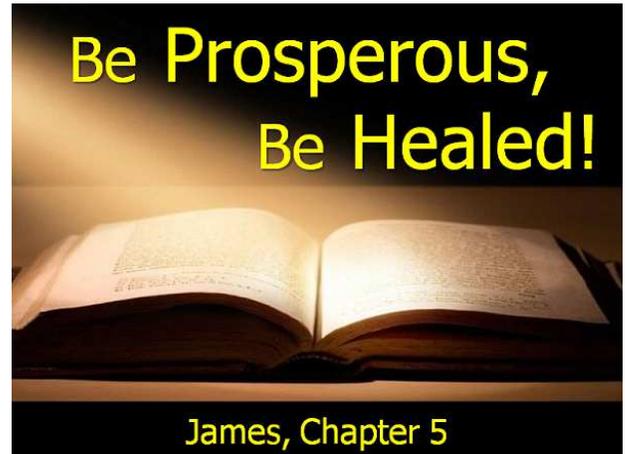
Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. Behold, 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 and 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.

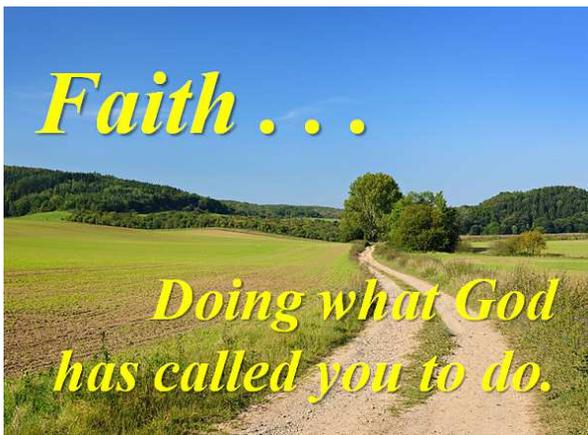
As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. But above all, my 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.

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.



We come today to the final chapter in the Letter of James, that letter the brother of Jesus wrote, apparently, to a group of churches that he called "the twelve tribes in the Dispersion" — Christians who, for James and other New Testament writers, were the continuation and fulfillment of what the Lord intended when he called Abraham to serve him and take his name before all nations. And, as we found in our study of the previous four chapters, this leader of the early church in Jerusalem has some pointed things to say about the enemies of the people of God, and some strong advice about how to secure the blessing of the Lord.



How do we live in the blessing of the Lord? Before we get to James, we need to set a larger stage in Scripture. The Bible promises a successful and victorious life to those who walk in the path God has laid out for his people. What does *success* mean in this context? We could summarize it this way: success, for the believer, means having the ability, the resources, and the determination *to do what the Lord has called us to do*. For that's what it means to have faith: not just having a certain

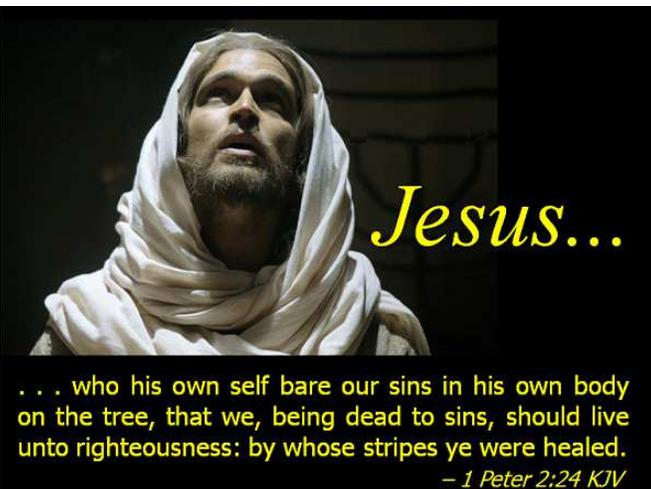
belief in our head, or even a trust in God's love and care for us, but *following through* on the assignment God has given each of us in life, and drawing on the resources his Holy Spirit gives us to carry out those responsibilities. As James wrote in chapter 2, "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe — and shudder!" (2:19). But they're still demons, and a person who says, "I believe," but then doesn't do what God wants him to do, with the abilities God has given him, isn't walking with God. That's how James ended the previous chapter, chapter 4: "Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin" (4:17).

So Scripture lays out a pathway for success through obedience to the commands of the Lord, conforming to the pattern of life he has laid down in the Word. As Proverbs 22:4 states, "The reward for humility and fear of the LORD is riches and honor and life." Not only is a prosperous life the promise of God, but he also offers a life of freedom from disease. To the children of Israel, having escaped the slavery of Egypt in the Exodus, he declared, "If you will diligently listen to the voice of the LORD your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give ear to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you that I put on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD, your healer" (Exodus 15:26). Healing, as well as wealth, comes through placing ourselves under the Word of God; as Psalm 107 says, "He sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from their destruction" (Psalm 107:20).

**"The reward for humility and fear of the LORD is riches and honor and life."
— Proverbs 22:4**



You see, the Bible looks upon poverty and sickness as a curse, the result of stepping aside from the way of the Lord. In Deuteronomy 28, Moses proclaims the blessing of the Lord on those who serve him; "The Lord will make you the head, and not the tail" (Deuteronomy 28:13). But that chapter devotes 54 out of 68 verses to a description of the curses that come upon a people that turns aside from following God's way. Included in this list are poverty, sickness, confusion, defeat, and things so horrible that we wouldn't like to read that chapter as our morning Scripture lesson.



But here's the good news: *Jesus has delivered us from the curse.* As Paul states in Galatians 3, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us — for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree' — so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith" (Galatians 3:13-14). And Peter writes, in 1 Peter 2, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds" — by his stripes — "*you have been healed*" (1 Peter 2:24). In summing up all Israel as Messiah, and all people as Son of man, in himself, Jesus took our failures, sins, and diseases to his

cross and opened up the door to the resurrection life of wholeness — of victory over lack, and sickness, and despair, and everything that partakes of the curse of sin.

And this life of blessing was present for all who came to Jesus as he went about preaching the gospel of the kingdom in Galilee and Jerusalem. Preaching after the resurrection, Peter declared, "You yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God

anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him" (Acts 10:37-38). The blessing of the Lord — the blessing God offers to all who serve him — always comes through Jesus. Are you sick? Scripture says Jesus healed *all* who came to him — no exceptions, no pre-healing interviews asking whether you deserve to be healed! Are you hungry? Jesus provided food for thousands who came to hear the message of God's kingdom — no exceptions, no screening to make sure you deserve not to starve! The gospel of the kingdom of God isn't a "gospel" of suffering, and poverty, and disease. It's a gospel of success in life, and having the ability and the resources to do what God calls you to do.

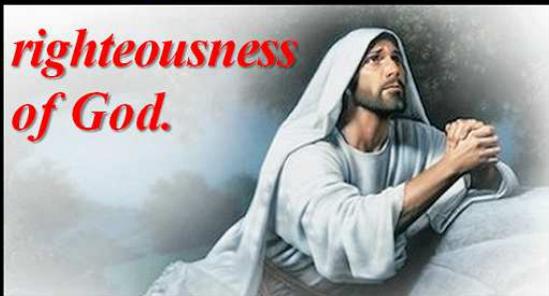
Jesus, you see, wasn't the poor, deprived person some people make him out to be. He went to the cross by his own decision, because that's what he had to do to fulfill the plan of God. "I lay down my life that I may take it up again," he said. "No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father" (John 10:17-18). But during his earthly ministry Jesus, by the standards of his community, was a wealthy man. He was in business as a contractor, a builder of houses (the Greek word *tekton* doesn't just mean "carpenter"). As he proclaimed the kingdom of God he called men of substance to follow him: men in the fishing business, or a tax collector for the Romans. They had a common treasury they maintained to give aid to the poor. Wealthy people, including the wife of one of Herod's officials, supported Jesus' work, and at his crucifixion a wealthy man provided the tomb for Jesus burial. As his body hung upon the cross, the Roman soldiers wouldn't cut up his tunic; it was of much finer quality than the clothing of their usual victims, so they cast lots for it instead. Jesus wasn't a poor man, and his life can't be used to justify exalting poverty as a more spiritual state than prosperity.

The gospel of the kingdom of God is a gospel of provision for every need!



For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the

righteousness of God.



— 2 Corinthians 5:21

It boils down to this: *God doesn't want you to be sick, or poor, or harassed by the issues of life.* If God allowed people to get sick, or go through other difficulties, in order to teach them patience, or build their character, or punish them, then would Jesus have healed *all* who came to him, or fed that entire hungry crowd of 5,000, no questions asked? No, *God wants to bless you with health and success.* If you're a believer, there's no virtue in telling everyone what a miserable person you are.

Unhappily, the people who wrote some of our favorite songs didn't have a full knowledge of the Word of God. As a Christian, I'm not a "child of sorrow and of woe." Whatever I was before I came to Jesus, I'm no longer

"such a worm as I," I'm no longer "a wretch like me." Expressions like this can be a way of telling the Lord, "Don't expect too much of me as a Christian." Once we give our lives to Jesus we're the righteousness of God in Christ, so we should be singing about *the blessings we now enjoy* as the people of God, and not about the misery that goes with godlessness. Negative and condemning speech about ourselves doesn't come from the Lord; it comes from the devil who works upon our unfiltered emotions to make trouble for us, and then uses

our own voice to tear us down. *Our mouth builds the highway we travel on through life*; let's not give our mouth to Satan so he can build a road that takes us to discouragement and defeat.

But now we come to James, who opens this chapter with these words: "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" (5:1-3). If God wants to bless us with a prosperous life, so that we have the resources we need to bless others and promote the gospel of God's kingdom, then *whom* is James talking about?

We know, from the New Testament, that there were some wealthy people in the early church. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth" (1 Corinthians 1:26). If "not many" were eminent, then *some* were. Purple fabric was expensive in the ancient world, and only the wealthy could afford it; yet Lydia, who opened her home to the Christians of Philippi, had a business dealing in purple (Acts 16:14). Philemon, to whom Paul wrote the letter bearing his name, was apparently well-to-do and owned slaves. Paul sent the runaway slave Onesimus back to him

as a fellow Christian, because (as he wrote to the Galatians) in Jesus "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one" (Galatians 3:28). The remarkable feature of the young church, and one that threatened Roman society, was that social rankings the rest of the world honored had no place; rich and poor, slave and free worshiped together.

Luke was able to put together his two-volume work, the Gospel and the Acts, because a wealthy man named Theophilus financed its publication, and is named at the beginning of each volume. By the way, it's sometimes said that Paul wrote more of the New Testament than anyone else but that's not true; by volume, Luke actually wrote more. And it was a wealthy Christian who made that possible. So there were rich people in the New Testament church who were committed followers of Jesus; whom, then, is James talking about when he condemns the rich?

We need to place ourselves into the environment of the Jerusalem congregation, of which James was the head. There, in the center of Jewish authority, the church was in a threatening situation. As we saw in chapter 2, some of James's brethren might have liked to welcome rich people into their church and give them preferential treatment because they might give status to the church in a hostile environment. But most Jerusalem Christians were persecuted and, as a result, were poor. That's why, wherever Paul was spreading the gospel in the Mediterranean world, he was also collecting an offering to help the "saints" of Jerusalem.

So I think the rich people James is upbraiding aren't rich Christians, but people of influence in the local Jewish community — the orbit in which James operated — who were taking part in the mistreatment of Christians. "You have condemned and murdered the righteous person," he says, "He does not resist you" (5:6). Whether any of *those* people ever got James's message I don't know, but I don't think he was condemning Christians because of their wealth when he wrote what he did. I come back to what I said before: the Lord doesn't want you to be poor, *he wants you to prosper*. He wants to bless you with whatever you need to do what he's calling you to do, and along with that to bless others in their need and also to provide for the work of the gospel. If we grasp for money in order to live "in luxury and in self-indulgence," as James says, then James's harsh words indeed apply to us. But if we seek the Lord's blessing in order better to equip ourselves to do his work, then we can expect to receive what we need from his open hand. (Exactly how we seek that blessing is a topic for another message.)



**"Is anyone among you suffering?
Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful?
Let him sing praise." – James 5:13**



And the Lord also doesn't want us to be sick! James takes up that topic near the end of his letter, with specific instructions on how to deal with illness. He begins, "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise" (5:13). What's our first response when we feel we're suffering, from whatever cause? My guess is that, for most people, the first response is to complain and then go tell everyone else how badly off we are. But the first response of the Christian is to take the situation to the Lord in prayer — the right kind of prayer. Some of our praying is no better than complaining; in fact, sometimes when we pray we're just trying to get God to feel as bad about our situation as we do! But that's not very

helpful, is it? We need to pray in faith, receiving or *taking* the answer he provides. We need to pray cheerfully, as James says — and if we're cheerful, then we *sing praise to God*. You may not think you can sing, but I assure you that whatever sound you're able to make the Lord will receive as joyful singing. Giving praise to God is healing in itself, because it takes the spotlight off our hurts and puts the focus on God. So don't wait to feel happy before you sing; sing first, and then you *will* be happy.

James then asks, "Is anyone among you sick?" Now, why does he have to ask? In many of our churches today, the question might be, "Is anyone here *not* sick?" The gospel of Jesus is a gospel both of spiritual renewal and physical healing; they're part of the same package. Scripture says, "By his stripes we are healed." What Jesus did on the cross brings resurrection life to our entire being, not our spirits only but also our bodies which are one day going to be transformed in God's new creation. In the Gospels, whenever Jesus meets people, he heals *all* of them, not just the "spiritual" part of them; and Hebrews 13:8 reminds us that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever."

So, for the Christian, *complete health is the norm and not the exception*. Yet we live in a world that doesn't understand that God created people to be healthy and "live long, live strong." There are things in our environment that come against us and cause disease, especially if we don't realize we have the authority to "rebuke the devil" so that he must flee from us — as James says in the previous chapter. One of the major causes of disease is *stress* — doctors will tell you that — and a principal cause of stress is a feeling of unworthiness, or regret, or guilt. So James offers detailed advice on how the sick person can be healed of his diseases:

Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed (James 5:14-16).

These are pretty specific directions, and as Bible-believing Christians we need to follow them. There are three components of this process. First, the sick person needs to be prayed for by the elders, or the leaders, of the church. Healing isn't just a matter between you and the Lord; it's also a matter for the body of Christ, the worshipping congregation. The church as a whole needs to pray for any member who is hurting, just as Paul tells the Galatians: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). Second, the sick person should be anointed with oil in the name of the Lord. In the



"Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up."

– James 5:14-15

Bible the anointing oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit, and like Holy Communion it's a physical point of contact with the power of the risen Jesus. It's wonderful to be "spiritual," but your body is physical the way God created it. So let's use the physical means God gave us — the means of laying on of hands and anointing with oil — to open the door for his working within our bodies.

Third, James urges us to "confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed." The purpose of confessing our sin is to get rid of the stress caused by our sense of guilt and unworthiness. It's fine to confess our sins privately to the Lord, but James is telling us we also need to confess to each other, in whatever appropriate way. "The prayer of a righteous person," James says, "has great power as it is working" (5:16). If you're hurting in some way, perhaps you need to get with a Christian you trust and release your burden. As James says, in the very last verses of his letter, "My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins" (5:19-20).



We have the resources for healing right here. We have the elders, we have the anointing oil, and we have brothers and sisters in the faith that we trust. Let's take advantage of all these resources, and be healed!

Finally, as we conclude our study of the Letter of James, let's back up to verses 7-9 in our chapter:

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.

Judgment is coming, says James the brother of Jesus; indeed, "the Judge is standing at the door." For those who don't know the Lord, that could be an ominous warning. As Hebrews says, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31) — and people do that every day by the way they choose to live. But for the believer who is determined to walk by faith in Jesus, and to do what the Lord calls him or her to do, that judgment is welcome; for *it's not punishment but vindication and justice*. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life" (Romans 2:6-7). James, in this short letter, has given us a pathway toward that life of patience and well-doing that will bring the encouragement of Jesus, and his words of approval: "Well done, good and faithful servant!" (Matthew 25:23).

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