

TABLETALK

MARCH 2026 | \$5



The
Church
in the
Wilderness

Pilgrims in the Wilderness

WHEN WE HEAR THE WORD *wilderness*, we often think of great stretches of raw nature—places that may be beautiful, yet difficult to inhabit. Israel experienced the wilderness shortly after being delivered in the exodus. It took the people only three days before they began complaining about water (Ex. 15:24). The wilderness is a trying place to live.

You may not realize it, but you and I live in the wilderness. The whole world does. Ever since we were exiled from Eden, we've been journeying through this fallen and hostile world. But the difference between Christians and non-Christians isn't their experience; it's their identity. Non-Christians are wanderers. Christians are pilgrims, passing through the wilderness to the promised land, the new Jerusalem. But the road is long. As a result, we're often like children on a road trip who confuse the journey itself with the destination. We grow exasperated with the inconveniences and the waiting. Our hearts quietly protest, "Will we ever get there?" Over time, this confusion hardens in one of two ways. We grow weary of the journey itself, settle into a dull sulk, and stare out the window as life passes us by, losing the energy and zeal that once marked our beginning. Or we lower our expectations and tell ourselves, "This is all there is." We convince ourselves that gas-station food is sufficient and stiff legs are simply the cost of living. There's another way, however. It's the way of Jesus. His whole earthly life was marked by pilgrimage, from the wilderness temptation to being crucified on the wood of the cross. In between, He walked dusty roads, gathering disciples who followed Him without fully knowing where the journey would lead. Same wilderness, different identity: pilgrims—followers of Jesus Christ.

Following Jesus doesn't remove us from the wilderness. But if we journey with Him, we receive His strength, His peace, and His destination (Heb. 12:22). What's more, we receive His people. Just as ancient Israel traveled together, so the church journeys through this world as one people—beset by trials, yet united under one Lord and one salvation. And along the way, He feeds us manna from heaven, nourishing us by Word and sacrament in Christ. The question isn't whether we're in the wilderness. The question is whether we realize what kind of journey we're on. Modern life tempts us to deny the wilderness, to put on rose-colored glasses and pretend that hardship is abnormal. But the Bible tells us otherwise. This life is hard. Christian life is hard. Yet Christ overcame the wilderness, and He will bring His people safely home (John 14:3). **✠**

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Tabletalk (USPS 009-013; ISSN 1064881X) is published monthly by Ligonier Ministries, Inc., 421 Ligonier Court, Sanford, FL 32771. Annual subscription price (12 issues): \$30.00. Periodicals postage paid at Lake Mary, FL, and additional mailing offices. The daily Bible studies are copyright 2026, Ligonier Ministries, Inc. Unless noted, all Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. Copyright 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Printed in Canada. **Postmaster: Send address changes to Ligonier Ministries, 421 Ligonier Court, Sanford, FL 32771.**



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Sojourners and Exiles

Sinclair B. Ferguson

As a Scot living in the United States, I developed a mischievous (but innocent) pleasure. If, after an elevator conversation, someone asked as I exited, “Where are you from?” I would smile and say, “Columbia, South Carolina”—and then enjoy puzzled looks as the doors closed. Apparently, I don’t sound as though I come from Columbia, S.C.

I wasn’t riding elevators to illustrate a *Tabletalk* article on the teaching of 1 Peter 2:11 that Christians are “sojourn-

ers and exiles” here. But it isn’t a bad illustration, is it? Because Peter is emphasizing that while as Christians we live in this world, we don’t belong to it the way others do. We belong to a “better country, that is, a heavenly one” (Heb. 11:16). Here we are “sojourners and exiles.” Therefore, our lives “speak” with a different “accent.” There is something distinctively and definitively different, something “foreign,” about us. We cannot hide what we are or where we belong. And while those who are citizens of this world only may not



be able to put their finger on it (“Are you from Germany?” I have been asked), they notice it and react. In fact, Peter (whose own accent once betrayed him) saw this as basic to our witness in the world and a reason that people would ask about “the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15). It’s interesting that Peter is not here urging us to start spiritual conversations with non-Christians (however worthy that might be); instead, he assumes that *they* will want to start the conversation, intrigued by our “accent.”

So we need to recognize that we have an “accent,” to own it rather than trying to disguise it, and to pray that the Lord will use it—employing the way that we live, speak, act, and behave with others—so that we shine as lights in the world as we point to the Light of the World (Matt. 5:14; John 8:12). Isn’t that how we want it to be? Thus, Christ will increase, and we will decrease (John 3:30), and whatever is Christ-attracting about us will point people beyond us to the Lord Himself.

New Testament Christians were dual citizens, “in Christ . . . at Ephesus [or Galatia, Corinth, or Rome].” We, too, live in this world but are, like our Savior and King, “not of the world” (John 17:14). It is important, therefore, to know what it means that “our citizenship is in heaven” (see Phil. 3:20).

Who, then, are we? We no longer “belong” here. Rather, we are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession. . . . Once . . . not a people, but now . . . God’s people” (1 Peter 2:9–10). Chosen, royal, holy, God’s possession—we have become blessed, privileged, dignified beyond measure—and all because we have received mercy and a new nationality. “Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, Who, like me, his praise

should sing?” (Henry F. Lyte, “Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven”).

Peter is here pointing to a fundamental structure of the Christian life: How we think about ourselves, understanding our new identity in Christ, transforms our motives, affections, desires, actions, and very existence. We now communicate in a “foreign accent.” Yes, our environment remains the same, and we still use the same old language. But we no longer sound like people who entirely belong here. Among other things, we now “abstain from the passions of the flesh” (2:11). Consequently, some are “surprised when [we] do not join them . . . and . . . malign [us]” (4:4). We may suffer a spiritual form of prejudice. Christ’s grace has made us surprising people after all. So the one thing that we ourselves should not be is surprised.

It is increasingly clear today that Christians “don’t belong.” Socially, it has become challenging to have a Christian “accent” and to believe, confess, and live out the gospel. But isn’t this how it was for New Testament Christians? So should we be surprised? No. Should we be intimidated and conform? No—for “if you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you” (4:14). When that happens, it is altogether possible that some will “see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation” (2:12).

We are strangers here, pilgrims on a journey. So until we get home, let’s live as sojourners and exiles. ■

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The Church in the Wilderness

Iain Duguid

The Israelites spent forty years in the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea before they entered the promised land. In the global scheme of their history, it was a relatively short time, a single generation. Yet that history provided the material for an entire book of the Pentateuch, the book of Numbers, whose Hebrew name is “In the wilderness,” after its first word in Hebrew. The wilderness is also the context in which much of the material

in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy was given to Moses. As a result, subsequent Old Testament authors looked back on this period of Israel’s history as being of great relevance for their own times and places. The writer of Psalm 95, for instance, warned his hearers against imitating that wilderness generation in testing the Lord (Ps. 95:8–11). Therefore, the Apostle Paul was hardly breaking new ground when he told the Corinthians that Israel’s wanderings in the wilderness “took place as examples for

us” (1 Cor. 10:6). So what are the lessons that we should learn from this pivotal period in Israel’s journey?

**THE LORD’S PURPOSES
IN LIFE’S WILDERNESS**

The first lesson from Israel’s time in the wilderness comes from recognizing the fact that it was the Lord Himself who brought the people there. The wilderness through which Israel journeyed was a harsh and unforgiving environment. Food and water were extremely scarce, as were other resources necessary to sustain life. It was certainly not “a land flowing with milk and honey,” as the Lord had described the land of Canaan that He would give His people (Ex. 3:8). Yet journeying through the wilderness was far from the only, or even the obvious, route by which Israel could have traveled from Egypt to the promised land. There was a short, direct coastal road that the Israelites could have taken that would have brought the people into Canaan in the space of mere days or weeks.

Yet the Lord chose not to take Israel that way, “lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt” (13:17). The Egyptians had a series of forts along the way that hugged the coastline, and the Philistines who inhabited the coastal plain farther east were formidable warriors. Even though the Lord could easily have overcome these obstacles just as He had parted the Red Sea, He chose instead to lead His people through the Red Sea and out into the wilderness. The wilderness was His good plan for their lives.

In the same way, Israel’s time in the wilderness shows us that the Lord’s wonderful plan for our own lives may include times of profound trial, suffering, and difficulty



as well as times of blessing and plenty. The Lord is our Shepherd when He brings us into wild and desolate places in life as well as when He leads us beside still waters and in green pastures (see Ps. 23). These may all be the routes that He has chosen to bring us to our ultimate place of rest.

Specifically, Israel's experiences in the wilderness revealed to the people their hearts in a way that their experiences of triumph did not. When the Lord parted the Red Sea in front of the Israelites and drowned the Egyptian chariots and horsemen behind them, Israel seemed thoroughly convinced of the Lord's power to protect them and provide for the nation (Ex. 14). The people were eager to praise the Lord in the aftermath of a victory in which they had not been required to lift a finger against the Egyptians (15:1–21). Yet within three days in the wilderness, when they struggled to find water and then came to Marah, where the only water was too bitter to drink, their hearts were uncovered as they also became bitter against the Lord (vv. 22–24). This was Israel's first test in the wilderness (v. 25), and the people failed it comprehensively.

The persistent pattern of Israel's grumbling against the Lord that began at Marah marked out much of the next forty years. The people grumbled about the lack of food (Ex. 16:2–3), the variety of food (Num. 11:4–6), the lack of water (Ex. 17:1–3), and ultimately even the promised land itself (Num. 13–14), after the majority of the spies who had been sent to explore the land brought back a negative report of the viability of an invasion (13:27–29). The Lord's concern about the Israelites' changing their minds when they saw warfare and desiring to go back to Egypt was fully justified. An entire generation of Israelites were condemned to

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die in the wilderness as a result of their unbelief (14:28–30).

It was not until that unbelieving generation was finally replaced by a new, believing generation that progress could be made and the land that God had promised their fathers could be given to them. Indeed, the book of Numbers is structured as the story of two generations: an unbelieving generation that was judged for its sin and died in the wilderness (Num. 1–25), and a second generation of faith that ends the book standing on the verge of entering the land (chs. 26–36).

The second generation's faith is exemplified in the story of Zelophehad's daughters, whose account brackets the narrative of the second generation in Numbers 27:1–11 and 36:1–12. Their father died in the wilderness, and it seemed that his line would come to an end with him since he had no sons to inherit his portion in the land of Canaan (27:3). That wouldn't have bothered most of the first generation of wilderness Israelites, who didn't believe that there was any serious likelihood of Israel's inheriting the land. Zelophehad's daughters, however, not only believed in God's promise that there would be an inheritance, but they were bold enough to go to Moses and ask that they might join in sharing it. At the Lord's command, the normal rules of inheritance, by which property went only to sons, were suspended, and these bold young women's faith received its fitting reward (27:5–11).

Like Zelophehad's daughters, we as Christians need to trust in God's promises and pursue full obedience to His Word, whether or not it seems to those around us likely to work out. Faith in God's faithfulness always receives its fitting reward in due season, and the women's faith stands as a model for us

to emulate. Part of the reason that God brings us into the wilderness is to bring us face-to-face with difficulties that will allow our faith in Him and His promises to be tested and to grow.

THE LORD'S PRESENCE WITH HIS PEOPLE

The second major lesson from the wilderness wanderings was the Lord's presence dwelling among His people. The Lord had certainly been with His people before the exodus. He was with the patriarchs while they sojourned in Canaan (e.g., Gen. 26:3), and He heard Israel's groaning in Egypt under Pharaoh's oppression, which led to His appearing to Moses at the burning bush and sending him to deliver the people from their bondage (Ex. 3:7–10). Yet God's presence with His people reached a new level in the wilderness. The Lord revealed Himself to Moses in fire and smoke on Mount Sinai, giving the Israelites His law to guide their behavior (chs. 19–24). But He also dwelled with them in a special way in the tabernacle, an ornate tent that He gave detailed instructions for building in the latter half of the book of Exodus (chs. 25–40). In the ancient Near East, the king's tent would typically be at the heart of the camp as his people went out to war, which is where the tabernacle was located during Israel's travels. The Lord, the King of Israel, would, as it were, share the people's sufferings as they wandered throughout the wilderness, going with them as they journeyed, camping where they camped, and moving on when they moved on.

The ark of the covenant, a box covered in gold and topped with cherubim, was situated at the heart of the tabernacle, in the Most Holy Place (see ch. 25). It represented the footstool of the Lord's invisible throne, which was situated above the

cherubim (Ps. 80:1), so that Moses could receive guidance from the Lord at the entrance to the tent whenever it was necessary (Ex. 29:42). The Lord also went ahead of His people in the form of a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire, guiding them when to stay longer in the place where they were camping and when to move on to the next location (Num. 9:15–23). In this way, the people had the Lord's direction and protection on every step of the journey in a way that was radically different from the experience of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

This identification of the Lord with the sufferings of His people throughout their wilderness sojourn points forward to His even fuller identification with us in the incarnation. In the prologue to John's gospel, when John tells us that the Word became flesh and “dwelt” among us, he chooses a verb related to the Greek noun used to describe the tabernacle: Literally, we might say, the Word “tabernacled” among us (John 1:14). Jesus truly is “Immanuel” (God with us; Matt. 1:23), experiencing all the difficulties and sorrows of life in this wilderness world alongside us. Indeed, as Matthew's gospel makes clear, Jesus personally reprised Israel's history as a child, going down to Egypt and surviving a king's genocidal threat to baby boys (Matt. 2:13–15). Having returned from Egypt, Jesus then underwent baptism, a symbolic death and burial that parallels Israel's crossing of the Red Sea (Matt. 3:13–17; see 1 Cor. 10:2), before going out into the wilderness for forty days and forty nights, paralleling Israel's forty-year wilderness wanderings (Matt. 4:1–11). There in the wilderness, Jesus faced three temptations that matched Israel's temptations, but whereas Israel failed repeatedly, Jesus perfectly obeyed in His wilderness trial, never grumbling

or complaining against the Lord. Instead, He faithfully quoted Scripture to the devil, showing His constant dependence on God's Word. Jesus rewrote Israel's story, as it were, replacing the nation's failure and the judgment of death that it merited with an obedience that merits life for Himself and for all those who are His people.

GOD'S FAITHFULNESS, HIS FORGETFULNESS, AND ORDINARY DAYS

Numbers 33 is an odd passage, one that you might be tempted to pass by in your daily Bible reading. The reason is obvious: It is simply a list of place-names where the Israelites camped in their wilderness wanderings. Yet it would be a mistake to ignore it. After all, the chapter begins by telling us that the Lord specifically commanded Moses to write down this list of place names for Israel to read (v. 2), so He must have had a good reason for including it in Scripture. What is that purpose, though?

If you look closely at the list of place-names, interesting details start to emerge. Some of the place-names have additional details about what happened there. These turn out to be the places where the Lord intervened to bless His people: Rameses, where the people of Israel went out triumphantly from their captivity (v. 3); Pi-hahiroth, where they crossed the Red Sea (v. 8); Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees to meet their needs (v. 9); and so on. As they read this list of place-names, the Israelites would continually have been reminded of the Lord's faithfulness to protect them and provide for them in the wilderness. These place-names were “ebenezers,” like the memorial stone that the Israelites erected in 1 Samuel 7:12, perpetual reminders that “till now the LORD has helped us.”

Yet the list also mentions many other places where Israel rebelled against the Lord. It includes Marah and Rephidim, where the Israelites grumbled about the lack of water (Num. 33:8, 14); Kibroth-hattaavah, where they complained about having no meat (v. 16); and so on. There is no mention, however, of any of these sinful grumbings in Numbers 33. If this list were the only record of Israel's wilderness wanderings, we would never know that the people had sinned. This reminds us of the Lord's intentional forgetfulness. He does not store up our sins in a book, waiting to throw them back in our faces at an opportune moment; rather, He takes His people's sins and transgressions and removes them from us as far as the east is from the west (Ps. 103:12). As the psalmist puts it: “If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared” (Ps. 130:3–4).

The third category of place-names in the list of Numbers 33 is the locations where, as far as we know, nothing of significance happened; this would include places such as Dophkah and Alush (Num. 33:12–13). These places remind us that life is not simply made up of triumphant experiences of the Lord's provision and humbling moments of our failure and sin but also includes its share of what we might call “plain-vanilla Tuesdays.” These are the days when we are engaged with the stuff of ordinary life, days that may seem at the time insignificant but that are all part of our journey through the wilderness of life. In Numbers 33, these places, too, are included in the list, making the total number of campgrounds that are recorded forty-two. This is not a random number

but represents six times seven, leaving the new generation of Israel on the brink of the seventh seven, the Sabbath rest of life in the promised land. There Israel would experience, in typological form, the blessing that awaits each of us at the end of our journey through this wilderness world: life in the land that God has prepared for us, the land flowing with milk and honey.

Our journey through life is also one that Jesus has triumphantly pioneered ahead of us (Heb. 12:2). In His humanity, Jesus experienced the Lord's provision of His every need as the Good Shepherd who led Him to green pastures and beside still waters (Ps. 23:2–3). Jesus also found the Lord to be His Good Shepherd in the darkest of valleys in life, guarding Him from all dangers (v. 4). And Jesus has now entered the heavenly banquet prepared for all His people by the Lord, with their cup running over and no need ever to leave (vv. 5–6). That provides us, His people—the present-day “church in the wilderness”—with great assurance for our own individual journeys. Jesus Christ knows the difficulties and challenges that we face and accompanies us through them. More than that, He has triumphed over them all already, and His perfect perseverance is now counted for us in place of our often complaining and whining responses to life's difficulties. All that is left for us to do is to persevere in faith, trusting in Jesus and looking to Him to provide for all our needs, until He welcomes us into His nearer presence forever. ■

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Christ in the Wilderness

Nick Batzig

We have all had experiences that have uniquely shaped who we are as individuals. Perhaps it was losing a parent at a young age, meeting our future spouse at a bookstore, getting a significant promotion at work, or suffering a particular physical affliction. Although they may have been shared experiences, the circumstances attending them make them uniquely formative for us as individuals. When others want to truly know you, they need to

know about the formative experiences of your life.

In the same way, the Lord Jesus had several significant experiences that uniquely defined Him as the Messiah. Among them are His incarnation, baptism, temptation, transfiguration, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Each of these epochal events played a significant role in Jesus' work as the Redeemer. Christ's temptation by the devil in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13) is among the most frequently

misunderstood of these epochal messianic experiences.

Many read about Christ's temptation without grasping the uniqueness of it for Him as the Redeemer. Instead, they first ask whether there are lessons to be learned about how we can resist temptation as He did. Though we can certainly glean important lessons from the example of Christ, His temptation in the wilderness was unique to His messianic person and work in redemptive history. How, then, can we rightly understand the redemptive significance of this unique experience for the Savior in the wilderness? We will first need to set it in context in redemptive history and then consider the circumstances surrounding it (e.g., the actors, location, temptation, and outcome). When we do, we will see that Jesus was recapitulating old covenant Israel's experience in the wilderness as the true Israel of God.

At the very outset of the New Testament, Matthew tells us that Jesus is the promised "son of Abraham" (Matt. 1:1). Christ is the *antitypical* son of Abraham. Isaac and Jacob were *types*—forms or examples that pointed forward to the fulfillment of the promise, which was revealed in Christ, the *antitype*. Isaac was the *typical* son of promise; Jesus is the true and ultimate Son of promise. As Jacob was first called *Israel* in redemptive history (Gen. 32:28), it is fitting that the true son of Abraham, Jesus Christ, would Himself be the true Israel of God.

Jesus understood the unique relationship that He held to Abraham as the One who would fulfill the promises given to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3). He told the Jews who opposed Him: "Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). Since Jesus is the promised son of Abraham,

He is the covenant-keeping Redeemer. The promises of God passed down from Abraham are fulfilled in Jesus (Gal. 3:16). Since He is the true son of Abraham, everyone united to Him by faith is ingrafted into the true Israel (Rom. 11:11-24). The Apostle Paul explained this succinctly when he wrote, "If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal. 3:29), and "for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God" (6:16).

In the record of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, we find indications that Jesus is in fact the end-time Israel come to secure the promised blessings of God (2 Cor. 1:20). The Synoptic Gospels reveal that the Spirit of God drove Jesus into the wilderness (Matt. 4:1; Mark 1:12; Luke 4:1). As the agent of the new creation, the Holy Spirit was operative in Christ to bring about a new exodus for the people of God. As old covenant Israel had been led by the Spirit of God through the waters of the Red Sea and into the wilderness, so Jesus, the true Israel of God, passed through the waters of baptism and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to bring about the new creation. The Spirit of the Lord with whom Christ was anointed at His baptism (Matt. 3:16-17) was the sovereign agent of what transpired in His experience in the wilderness. The Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness to do what Israel had failed to do—namely, secure the promised blessings of God by covenant obedience. As the typological son of God (Ex. 4:22), old covenant Israel was called to be the agent of blessing the nations. As was true of Adam, the son of God (Luke 3:38) in the garden, however, Israel failed to obtain what was promised. It would be only through the obedience of the true

Israel of God that the blessings of God would be secured for His people out of every nation, tribe, language, and people (Rev. 5:9; 7:9; 13:7; 14:6).

The wilderness experience for old covenant Israel had been a period of testing. So, too, the wilderness experience for Jesus as the true Israel of God was one of testing. In the wilderness, God's Son engaged in hand-to-hand combat with Satan. As soon as Adam brought sin and its deleterious effects into the world, the Lord gave the first gospel promise to man (the *protoevangelium*; Gen. 3:15). He graciously promised to send a Redeemer (i.e., the seed of the woman) to conquer the one who conquered man. In Christ's coming into the world, the seed of the woman came to destroy the works of the evil one (1 John 3:8). In the wilderness, Christ faced off with the serpent of old. He struck a decisive blow to him by resisting his temptations. This initial combat was necessary for Jesus, as true Israel, to carry on the work that He had come to do in destroying the work of the evil one. The New Testament scholar G.K. Beale draws the connection between what Jesus was doing in the wilderness and what Israel had failed to do in the later conquest of Canaan:

The defeat of the devil in the wilderness may also be viewed secondarily to be Jesus's first act of conquering the latter-day Canaanites in the promised land as true Israel. . . . Each of the Deuteronomy contexts reveals the goal of God's desire for the people of Israel to remain faithful in the face of their temptations: they would "go in and possess the good land which the Lord swore" to give "by driving out all your enemies from before you" (Deut. 6:18–19).

The period of forty days and forty nights (Matt. 4:2) during which Jesus fasted in the wilderness is also a significant circumstance of His temptation. As Israel had been forty years in the wilderness, so Jesus experienced an analogous period of testing. Additionally, Jesus was acting as the greater Moses in the wilderness. The Lord called Moses to be the representative leader of His people throughout their time in the wilderness. Moses fasted for forty days and forty nights on the mountain as he received the revelation of God (Ex. 34:28). Jesus cited the very words that Moses spoke to Israel at the mountain (Deut. 8:3; 6:16; 6:13). Beale again explains:

Each response by Jesus to Satan is taken from a response by Moses to Israel's failure in the wilderness (Deut. 8:3 in Matt. 4:4; Deut. 6:16 in Matt. 4:7; Deut. 6:13 in Matt. 4:10). Jesus succeeds in resisting the same temptations to which Israel succumbed.

Israel was tested with *hunger* but failed by complaining and grumbling about the Lord and His gracious provisions (Deut. 8:3). Israel was tested as to the fidelity of its *worship* but failed by worshipping the idol-gods of the nations around it (6:13–15). Israel rebelled at Meribah and at Massah by questioning God's *power* (6:16). Jesus resisted the temptation to *hunger*, *worship*, and *power* in His three temptations. Behind this was the threefold temptation of our first parents in the garden. The temptation of Jesus in the wilderness carries with it the same structure as the temptation of Adam and Israel. Satan tempted our first parents with "the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life" (1 John 2:16). Eve ate the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil when she



allowed herself to believe that it was "good for food, pleasant to the eyes and desirable to make one wise" (Gen. 3:6).

Jesus' obedience in the wilderness was a necessary part of His accomplishment of redemption (Rom. 5:19). Whereas Adam and Israel disobeyed in their representative roles, Jesus obeyed as the last Adam and true Israel—the end-time Son of God and son of Abraham. By His obedience, Jesus struck a necessary blow to the evil one. By His death, Christ disarmed principalities and powers (see

Col. 2:15). At Calvary, the promised seed of the woman crushed the head of the serpent while being bruised for our iniquities. In His resurrection, Jesus is shown to be the victorious last Adam and true Israel of God—the Head of a redeemed humanity. God calls us to trust Him alone for the enjoyment of the covenant blessings that He secured by His obedience. ■

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Strength for the Journey

Jon D. Payne

J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* has captivated the imagination of millions since the first volume was published in 1954. It tells the enchanting tale of whimsical hobbits who embarked on a journey to save Middle-earth. Traveling with them on the perilous mission to Mordor were an elf, a dwarf, a wizard, and a man. Always working against the hobbits and their fellow travelers was the Dark Lord Sauron. To thwart their mission, the sorcerer commissioned vast orc armies and the shadowy Ringwraiths. Throughout their journey, the small band was often plagued with fear, exhaustion, and despondency. On occasion, they despaired of life itself. They wondered how they could carry on in the face of so many obstacles

and setbacks. At timely junctures, however, doubts and fears were met by unexpected encounters of warm hospitality. Allies in the war against evil provided the weary travelers with much-needed provision. They never would have survived the burdensome journey without these safe havens of friendship. Sweet table fellowship quieted their fears, renewed their strength, and bolstered their resolve in the quest to destroy the One Ring.

The Christian life is also a journey. For most of us, it's an arduous one. Perhaps that's why stories like *The Lord of the Rings* are so compelling to Christians. They invite sober reflection on our own journey as pilgrims traveling through the hostile "Middle-earth" of this present evil age (Gal. 1:4; Eph. 6:12–13). As we make our way to

the Celestial City, such stories elicit the same feelings of anguish and hope that we experience in our own lives. They powerfully remind us that we cannot survive the journey alone. Solo travel is not a viable option (Rom. 12:4–8). Pilgrims on the way need God's spiritual provision and covenant people. God furnishes His people with what they need both in and through His Son. Indeed, Christ Jesus welcomes and strengthens His weary pilgrims through the ordinary means of grace in the local church—an outpost of heavenly provision (1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Peter 2:2–3).

The necessity of God's gracious provision for the journey of faith is a precept taught long before the emergence of the New Testament church. During ancient Israel's long trek through the wilderness, under Moses' leadership, God supplied the people with promises of salvation, manna from heaven, and water from the rock (Ex. 15–17). For forty years, God spread a veritable "table in the wilderness" for His covenant people (Ex. 16:35; Ps. 78:19). His provision of bread and water, however, was much more than a means to gain physical strength. They were heavenly signs pointing to something, or rather Someone, infinitely greater.

Fifteen hundred years after Moses, Jesus declared to the crowds at Capernaum:

"Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. . . I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."
(John 6:49, 51)

In other words, the manna in the wilderness signifies our Lord Jesus Christ. It points to Him. Compelled by infinite

love, the Father sent His only begotten Son, "the true bread from heaven," down to earth to give life to the world (John 6:32). Christians receive and are nourished by this life-giving Bread through the exercise of saving faith (Eph. 2:8–9). Christ Himself is our strength for the journey. The Welsh hymn writer William Williams gives poetic expression to this truth:

*Guide me, O thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but Thou art mighty; hold me with thy powerful hand;
Bread of heaven, Bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more,
Feed me till I want no more.*

In addition to supplying Israel with manna from heaven, God miraculously provided fresh drinking water from the rock. This occurred when Israel "camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink" (Ex. 17:1–7). Therefore, God commanded Moses to strike the rock at Mount Horeb. As a result, the rock became a spring of water for parched Israel. It was a miracle. Like the manna, however, the rock pointed to something far greater than Israel's physical sustenance in the wilderness. Concerning this Rock, the Apostle Paul states: "Our fathers . . . all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ" (1 Cor. 10:1–4). Jesus is the spiritual Rock that provides us with the water of life. Jesus announces that He is the "living water" and that whoever receives Him possesses a "spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:10, 14). Kim Riddlebarger explains:

The events which Paul recounts from Israel's history prefigure the realities



that have now dawned on the messianic age. God did these things during Israel's journey through the wilderness to ensure that his purposes would ultimately be accomplished, and that redemptive history would reach its ultimate goal with the coming of the Messiah.

Furthermore, *Israel's journey through the wilderness prefigures our own.* Jesus Christ, the greater Moses, delivered us from Satan's captivity through His shed blood, smeared on the crossbeam of Calvary. Christ is our Passover Lamb (1 Cor. 5:7). Through the waters of Christian baptism, prefigured by the baptism of Moses and Israel through the Red Sea, we, by sovereign grace, embark on a lifetime journey of faith (1 Cor. 10:1–2). The demanding trek takes us through the thorny wilderness of this present evil age. It's a hostile age in which faith is fiercely tested by Satan, sin, and suffering. But we do not travel alone. Christ is our faithful companion and loyal

friend (Matt. 28:20; Heb. 13:5). Nor are we left to rely on our own spiritual resources. Christ Himself, through the ministry and fellowship of the church, provides all our spiritual needs. He renews, comforts, and strengthens our faith through the Word, sacraments, and prayer (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 1:18). Therefore, to neglect Christ's means of grace and eschew fellow pilgrims is analogous to a hobbit's facing the powerful Lord Sauron and the mighty orc army alone. It's a quest that is doomed to fail and end in spiritual ruin.

A better way is to heartily embrace active membership in a biblical church. Through a faithful ministry, Jesus Himself provides leadership and provision for His redeemed pilgrims. He is life-giving Bread from heaven and a Rock who quenches spiritual thirst. A healthy local church, therefore, is a spiritual watering hole in the wilderness.

Through faithful preaching, Christ personally nourishes our souls with gospel

The Christian life is not designed to be an autonomous journey of self-reliant faith.

promises. As the waters of baptism are poured out, Christ assures us that nothing, not even the vast armies of hell, can separate a believer from union with Him. As the elements of bread and wine are distributed during the Lord's Supper, Christ, by His Spirit, personally fortifies our faith and comforts us. When the minister prays for weak and weary pilgrims during the pastoral prayer, the Great High Priest renews our affections and strengthens our resolve to continue our spiritual journey through the treacherous "Misty Mountains" of this life.

Understood in this light, Lord's Day worship is, first and foremost, a top-down affair. The focus is not on our creative performance for God but on God's work of salvation for us. A widespread misunderstanding on this point may account for the large number of spiritually malnourished believers in our day. Believers who live between the exodus and the promised land don't need more sanctified entertainment

and therapeutic advice. They need Christ through Word and sacrament. They need the soul-nourishing ministry of the local church. They need fellow pilgrims who, with love and solidarity, confess the faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3). Dear believer, this is what you and I need for the journey of faith more than anything else. It's what we need to endure and to be useful to God along the way. Like the early Christians, let us "devote [ourselves] to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42).

The hobbits and their friends would have never made it through the rugged terrain of Middle-earth or the unspeakable dangers of Mordor without help and encouragement along the way. Moreover, their friendship, fellowship, and mutual support played a crucial role in reaching their destination and fulfilling their mission. Tolkien's fanciful myth reminds us of essential biblical truth.

The Christian life is not designed to be an autonomous journey of self-reliant faith. A thousand times, no. As we traverse this dark wilderness to the lush hills of the new creation, Jesus promises to guide, instruct, feed, and nourish His redeemed pilgrims through the ordinary means of grace. Through the ministry of Word and sacrament, Christ gives us Himself and powerfully reminds us that we do not make our way to the "Undying Lands" alone. He is with us, along with our fellow pilgrims. Dear pilgrim believer, there's no better way to travel. ■

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Our Heavenly Homeland

Eric B. Watkins

What will our next home be like? Many people know the joy of living in the same place for most of their lives. Others, like my wife and me, have experienced the providential adventure of moving many times. She was a missionary kid and a pastor's kid. Her family traveled the country in a van, lived in many states, and spent years in Europe as missionaries. I grew up as a military kid, and every few years the Marine Corps loved us and had a wonderful plan for our lives, which meant constantly moving us someplace new. After getting married, my wife and I lived in many places together (mostly school related), and it was not until we had been mar-

ried fourteen years and were in our late thirties that either one of us had lived in the same place for more than four years. We have wondered many times, "What will our next home be like?"

For the Christian, this question is very real and immensely practical. Whether we have lived in the same home for many years or wandered about like windswept nomads, we are all a pilgrim people. No matter where on earth we live, life slowly and effectively teaches us that this world is not our home. As the old hymn "Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus" goes, "The things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace."

Few examples in the Bible demonstrate this pilgrim perspective better than the life

of God's people, particularly Abraham and Sarah, as described in Hebrews 11:13–16:

These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

The unique emphasis of these verses is the life of Abraham and Sarah. Though they are part of the "hall of faith" that includes Abel, Enoch, and Noah, Enoch did not die, and only Abraham and Sarah were called to leave one homeland in search of another (v. 15). The author of Hebrews is highlighting a particular point of tension in the life of Abraham and Sarah: They died "not having received the things promised" (v. 13). There is a certain irony in this statement. In fact, it seems almost contradictory to the facts. God had promised several things to Abraham: a people (children), a place (the promised land of Canaan), and a kingly descendant, One through whom the nations would be blessed.

At first blush, it would seem that by the time Abraham died, these promises were, in many ways, already fulfilled. Isaac was born (albeit when Abraham and Sarah were one hundred years and ninety years old, respectively). Other sons were born to Abraham, and it appears as though the promise of innumerable descendants was

already bearing fruit. Abraham and Sarah also found their way, by God's leading, to the land of Canaan, as God had promised. And though Isaac bore no kingly role, it was clear that the hand of God was on him and that God's plan for him was not simply to bless him but to bless others through him. This is so often how it works with God's people then and now: He blesses us not simply for our sakes but so that we might also be a blessing to others. From a human point of view, God had done what He said He would do; He had kept His promise to be a blessing to Abraham.

The author of Hebrews, while affirming God's faithfulness to His promises, also acknowledges that there was something *not yet* complete about the fulfillment of them. To say it differently, the earthly fulfillment of each of these promises was meant to give way to an even greater heavenly fulfillment. The biological descendants of Abraham would grow into a big, beautiful family in the nation of Israel, but God had an even greater family in store for Abraham—the church. Abraham would become not simply the biological father of Israel, so to speak, but the spiritual grandfather of all who believe in Christ Jesus. Those who are in Christ have Abraham in common as a spiritual grandfather.

In the last promise—that of a kingly descendant who would become a blessing to the nations—it is very easy to see how it was pointing to Jesus Christ. What God had in store as He made that promise to Abraham was clearly more than Isaac would ever become, and even greater than any of the kings of Israel would become as well. Neither Saul nor David nor Solomon would ever become what the Son of God would. Not only did God know this, but the Bible also seems to indicate this as well. Jesus said in John 8 that Abraham



saw Christ's day and rejoiced. What exactly Abraham saw and rejoiced over is a matter of curious speculation. Some commentators suggest that it was when God gave Isaac back to Abraham alive in Genesis 22 that Abraham understood that God was going to do what Abraham did not have to—that God was going to offer up His Son in sacrifice, taking the place of Abraham and taking the place of God's people. Though this view of what Abraham “saw” cannot be proved, it seems reasonable. Either way, Abraham saw something of Christ's day that caused him to rejoice. In this, Abraham would

die an old man with many children and grandchildren, yet he would know that God still had something better in store for him, something that could find fulfillment only in Jesus.

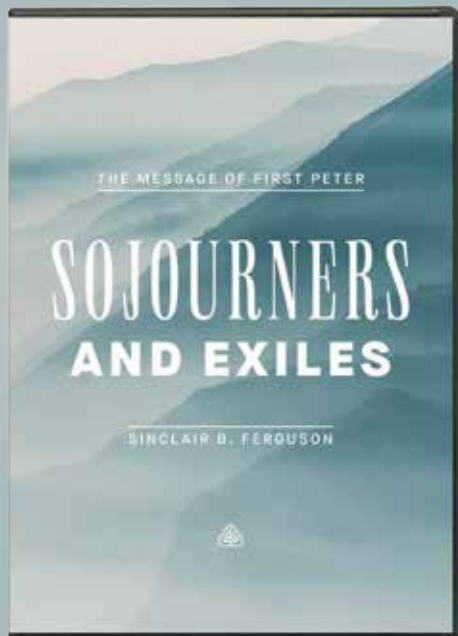
What was true of these two promises was also true of the land. God had something far greater in store for Abraham and Sarah than real estate in the Holy Land. As good and pleasant as that land was, it was nothing in comparison to the heavenly land above that God had designed not just for Abraham and Sarah but also for all those who look to Him by faith in Christ Jesus. This is the pastoral point

of Hebrews 11:13–16. Even during their walks of faith here on earth, Abraham and Sarah knew that they were a pilgrim people. They were “strangers and exiles” (v. 13) here, even while sojourning in the land that God had given them. This was exemplified, according to verses 9–10, in that the entire time that Abraham and Sarah lived in the land of promise, they dwelled in tents. Though the land was his, and Abraham was the “heir of the world” (Rom. 4:13), he lived like a pilgrim, sojourning in tents, indicating to himself, his family, and others that the temporary things of this present evil age were not

his everlasting inheritance. God Himself was Abraham's true reward (Gen. 15:1, KJV)—not just the land, not just children. Nothing that God promised to Abraham was greater than God Himself.

This takes us back to the question at the beginning of this article: What will our next home be like? My wife and I now live in a house and a city in which we would love to grow old. We love the people, the place, and our church family here. We love our home. But what makes a house a home? It's not the dwelling place—the structure—but the people who live there that make a house into a home. What is so beautiful about heaven is not simply the fact that the effects of the curse (sin, death, and misery) are *no longer present*; what makes heaven truly heaven is the fact that *God Himself is present there*. This is what the author of Hebrews is emphasizing. God's pilgrim people, even while enjoying the good gifts that God had given them, nevertheless realized that the gifts of God paled in comparison to the God of those gifts. They were a pilgrim people, learning to have the eyes of their souls farsightedly fixed on the things of heaven. This is often the struggle of the Christian life—not to fix our gaze on the things that are right in front of us, whether good or bad, but to fix our eyes on Christ and the better things that are yet to come in Him. As Abraham and Sarah fixed their eyes on heavenly things, God was not ashamed of them. He was not ashamed to be called their God, nor is He ashamed of us as we fix our eyes on our heavenly homeland. ■

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Concluding our study of the epistle of James this month, we will see that Christian living is defined by dependence on God. In our study of James 4–5, we

will read that the way to exaltation is to reject worldliness and humbly depend on our Creator as Judge (4:1–12). We will be reminded that God alone knows the future, and so we must depend on His wise providence in our planning (vv. 13–17). We will see again the folly of depending on our wealth and our need to patiently depend on

God for our rescue in suffering (5:1–12). We will be exhorted to prayer as the fundamental expression of our dependence on the Lord (vv. 19–20).

God is the all-powerful Lord of all, and we are powerless creatures. May we therefore always depend on Him. **✠**

**“PRAYER IS A
PRINCIPAL BRANCH
OF RELIGIOUS
WORSHIP. . . THOSE
THAT LIVE WITHOUT
PRAYER, LIVE
WITHOUT GOD IN
THE WORLD.”**

—Matthew Henry, from
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ABIDING IN THE WORD

These verses parallel the themes of the studies each week. We encourage you to hide them in your heart so that you may not sin against the Lord:

Week of March 8	JAMES 4:10
Week of March 15	PROVERBS 11:4
Week of March 22	JAMES 5:16
Week of March 29	JAMES 1:22



GROWING UP IN CHRIST

KYLE BORG

An important part of life is growing up. It begins when a child starts putting childish things away—packing up toys, taking on new responsibilities, and wanting to sit with the adults. Parents rejoice as their children reach new milestones. Eventually, maturity is expected. What was once endearing in childhood becomes inappropriate with age. That’s how life goes: We grow out of the immaturities of childhood into the maturity of adulthood.

The Bible draws a similar comparison between natural and spiritual growth. The Apostle Paul wrote: “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways” (1 Cor. 13:11). God’s grace in Jesus Christ doesn’t leave us as spiritual infants; it causes us to grow and mature into adulthood. The biblical idea of maturity is *completion*—fulfilling the purpose for which God has called us. Spiritual maturity is measured not by age, experience, or gray hair but by the perfecting work of God in our lives.

A mature Christian is *assured*. Epaphras prayed that the Colossians would “stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God” (Col. 4:12). The will of God includes everything that He has revealed concerning Himself, His purposes, and His commands. As we grow in grace, we gain a deeper understanding and firmer confidence in that will. Maturity brings a settled conviction and assurance that what God has said is true and trustworthy.

A mature Christian is *discerning*. The au-

thor of Hebrews was astonished that his readers had not grown up but were still living on spiritual milk. “Solid food,” he wrote, “is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil” (Heb. 5:14). Spiritual adults don’t merely know what is right—they choose what is right and refuse what is wrong. Their minds are constantly fed by the solid food of God’s Word.

A mature Christian is *stable*. Just as toddlers wobble and fall as they learn to walk, spiritual children are easily shaken. Paul warns that immature believers can be “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14). To grow His people and make them steady and stable, Christ has given them ministers of the Word so that “we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (v. 13). Maturity steadies the believer in Christ.

Finally, a mature Christian is *persevering*. In this life, we are never complete—never made perfect. Paul knew this, yet he pressed on, “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead” (Phil. 3:13). He called this the mature way of thinking (v. 15). Those who are growing up in Christ know that much remains unfinished—but they do not slow down. They keep pressing onward and upward toward Christ. **T**

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THE NEED TO ASK RIGHTLY

JAMES 4:1–3 “You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions” (vv. 2–3).

Having explained the nature of the “wisdom from above” and its role in securing peace and righteousness (James 3:13–18), the Apostle in today’s passage turns to address the lack of peace and righteousness in his audience. As we will see, James’ original readers struggled to maintain peace and righteousness because they were not asking for God’s assistance rightly or even at all.

James begins by noting that warring passions within the audience were causing quarrels and fights among them (4:1–2). Here the words translated as “passions,” “desire,” and “covet” all refer to what one commentator calls “a strong and unhealthy craving to secure something not currently one’s own.” Human passions and desires are not always evil; they become sinful when we long for what is inherently sinful, desire that which cannot rightfully be ours, or allow the strength of our cravings to control us. These passions were at war “within” the audience, which refers to the conflict of desires within the souls of individuals, to passionate arguments between people, or likely to both. Individual passions, desires, and covetousness was boiling over into communal strife in the churches that James addresses. Moreover, this strife was heated. These were not minor disagreements but “war” (v. 1). James even says that desires were leading to “murder” (v. 2). It is unlikely that the Apostle refers to actual taking of human life, though it is not impossible that some violence had occurred, especially if some in the audience once belonged to the party of the Zealots, Jews who sought the overthrow of Rome. In any case, “murder” is an appropriate metaphor to describe the ferocity of the conflicts, for the destructive use of the tongue can kill relationships and reputations, and anger violates the commandment against murder, which is also the inevitable result of unconstrained anger (see Prov. 18:21; Matt. 5:21–26).

Why did so many in James’ audience lack the wisdom from above that leads to peace and righteousness? First, multiple individuals had failed to ask for it (James 4:2). The present tense of the verb “ask” in the Greek indicates that the problem may have been that readers were not persevering in asking but giving up after the Lord did not provide right away. Additionally, many men and women were asking for wisdom not to use it for peace and righteousness but solely to benefit themselves (v. 3). We cannot count on God to give us what we ask for if we do not ask with the right motives. **T**



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

The Venerable Bede writes, “God loves to be asked, so that he can give.” By His very nature, the Lord is generous and giving, and He loves to give us what we need, especially when it enables peace and righteousness. Sometimes, however, He will not give unless He is asked. Therefore, let us ask the Lord to supply our needs, trusting that He will provide according to His sovereign wisdom and generosity.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

2 Chronicles 1:7–13
Proverbs 4:1–9
Matthew 7:7–11
James 1:5–7

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Numbers 29–31
Mark 10:1–34



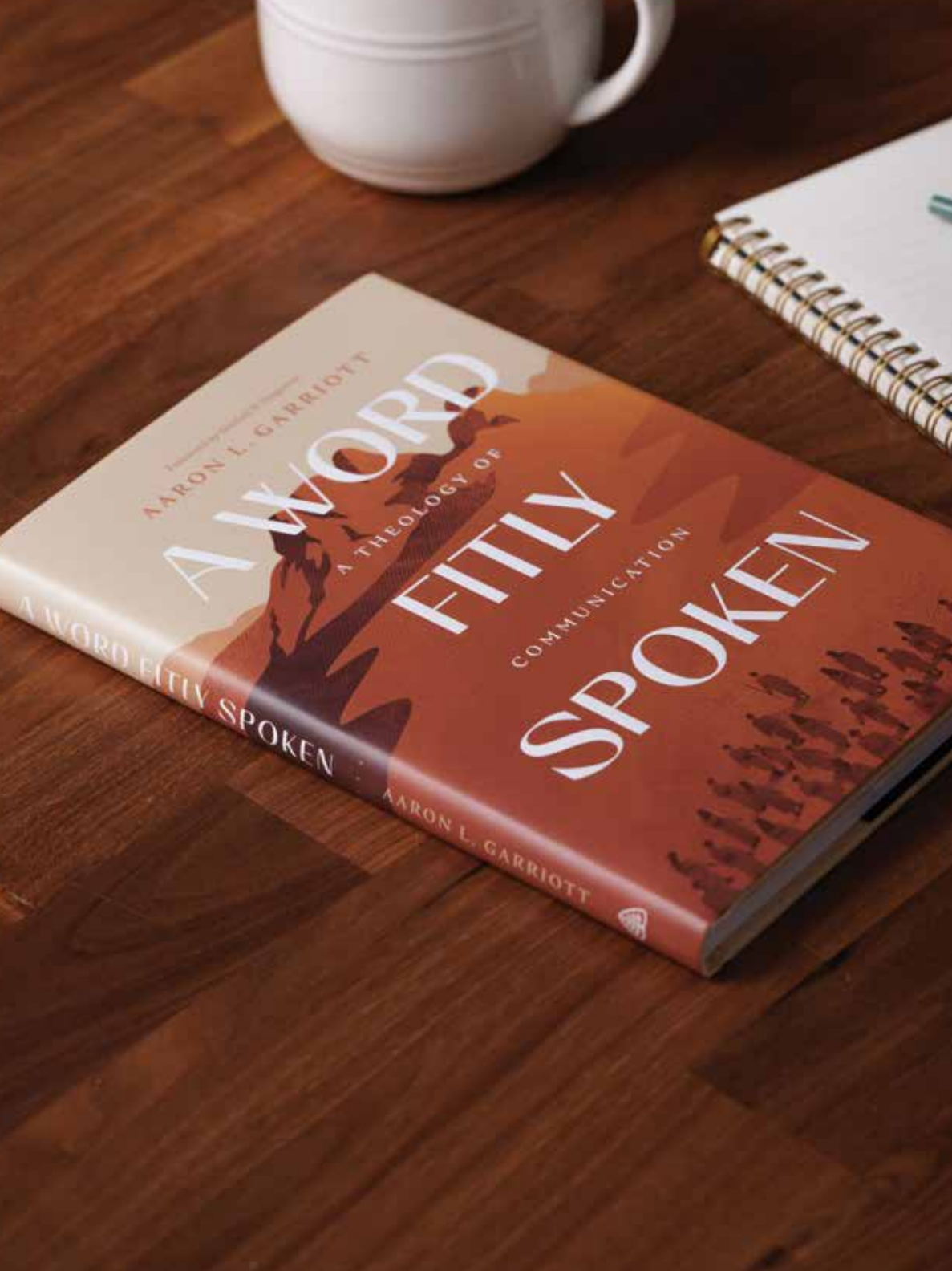
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FRIENDSHIP WITH THE WORLD

JAMES 4:4 “You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

Matthew Henry writes that “he who sets his heart upon the world, who places his happiness in it, and will conform himself to it, and do any thing rather than lose its friendship, he is an enemy to God; it is constructive treason and rebellion against God to set the world upon his throne in our hearts.” Let us regularly ask ourselves whether we have become friends of the world, and may we pursue friendship with the Lord with all that we are.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Deuteronomy 5:7
Ezekiel 16
2 Timothy 4:10
1 John 2:15

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Mark 10:35–52
Numbers 32–34

Discord threatened to tear apart the churches to whom James wrote his epistle, for many of his addressees lacked the heavenly wisdom needed to maintain peace and righteousness among them. The readers had not asked the Lord for such wisdom or had asked with wrong motives, and the result was men and women controlled by their passions instead of submitting their desires to God in holiness (James 4:1–3). Today’s verse gives us further indication of just how bad the problem actually was.

James calls his audience an “adulterous people” (v. 4). Literally, the Greek labels the people “adulteresses,” which might seem like an odd way to refer to a group of men and women until we consider Old Testament theology. Frequently, the old covenant prophets liken the relationship between God and Israel to that of a married couple, with God as the Husband and Israel as the wife (e.g., see Isa. 57:5–6). God and His people were to live in an intimate relationship and to be completely faithful to one another. While the Lord is always faithful to His people, the old covenant community as a whole often failed to reciprocate. Instead, they chased after other gods, leading the prophets to compare Israel to an adulteress. Hosea in particular makes much of this metaphor. In any case, James’ point is that his audience was continuing the long tradition of God’s covenant people’s being unfaithful to Him.

James’ audience evidenced spiritual adultery in their partiality, misuse of the tongue, and pursuit of envy and other passions (James 2:1–13; 3:1–4:3). Such things, we see in James 4:4, are marks of friendship with the world, which is enmity with God. Friendship in the ancient world was often regarded more seriously than it is today, involving deep loyalty and shared allegiance. Thus, one cannot be a friend with both God and the world. John Calvin elaborates on this, explaining that “the friendship of the world [is] when men surrender themselves to the corruptions of the world, and become slaves to them.”

Friendship with the world does not refer simply to enjoying things in the world. Matthew Henry comments, “A man may have a competent portion of the good things of this life, and yet may keep himself in the love of God.” We become friends of the world when we allow our desires to pull us away from the Lord into disharmony, unjust discrimination, jealousy, and a host of other ills. **TL**

GRACE FOR THE HUMBLE

JAMES 4:5–6 “Do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, ‘He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us’? But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’”

Friendship with God is incompatible with friendship with the fallen order of the world, a point that James 4:4 makes quite plainly (see also 1 John 2:15). Believers, therefore, cannot expect to enjoy close fellowship with our Creator if we live according to the ways of the world in misusing our tongues, showing sinful partiality, neglecting the widow and orphan, and fighting with one another because we cannot keep our passions under control (James 2:1–13; 3:1–4:3). Such behavior is no minor transgression; it actually demonstrates spiritual adultery, the abandonment of God our Husband for lesser things that we love more than Him (4:4).

If we fall into such sin, we need to be reminded of the Lord’s deep affection for us and His willingness to receive us back when we turn from our spiritually adulterous ways. James provides this in today’s passage. The Apostle points us to the truth that “he yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell within us” (v. 5). This is a difficult passage, and many commentators believe that James’ point is that life according to God’s Holy Spirit within us is incompatible with our giving in to our sinful yearnings. While this idea no doubt reflects biblical teaching, it seems more likely that James is making a point about God’s jealousy for His covenant people. Like any good and loving husband, God is jealous to protect His relationship with His wife—that is, believers (see Ex. 20:4–6). He will not tolerate our showing affection to other things that is due to Him alone, and He will lovingly chastise us if necessary to remind us that we are to love Him above all else (see Heb. 12:3–11).

This reminder that God will do what it takes to rescue us from wallowing in our sin should encourage us to develop a healthy and holy respect for Him, a reverent fear that encourages those of us who have trusted in Christ to draw close to Him and not to run away from Him. After all, James 4:6 tells us, the Lord “gives more grace.” Even the most faithful Christian can fall into patterns of sin that evidence spiritual adultery. Yet thanks be to God that, though we may be expert sinners at times, our Creator is much better at saving us than we are at sinning. He always has grace for us that is greater than all our sin. We cannot exhaust His infinite stores of grace.

His grace is for all who are humble. God firmly opposes the proud who refuse to recognize their need for His aid, but He always gives His grace to those who ask for it through Christ (v. 6). **TL**



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

Scripture has many warnings for those who pridefully rely on themselves and do not seek the gracious help of the Lord. Ultimately, only the proud refusal to admit our sin and rest in Christ will keep us out of the kingdom of God. Rejecting Jesus is no insignificant matter; it makes us enemies of the Lord, who is so kind in giving us a Savior. The church father Jerome writes, “One who holds his head high in arrogance hates God.”

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Proverbs 3:33–34
Nahum 1:2
Zephaniah 3:9–13
1 Peter 5:5

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Numbers 35–36
Mark 11:1–14

SUBMISSION TO THE LORD

JAMES 4:7–8a “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.”



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

Ambrose of Milan, the preacher under whose ministry Augustine of Hippo was converted, writes that “God . . . does not drive away those who draw near to him.” This is an important truth to remember. No matter what we have done, the Lord will never reject us if we draw near to Him in faith and repentance. May we not allow the seriousness of our sin to keep us away from our loving Father in heaven. We may always draw near to Him through Christ.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Isaiah 48:12–22
Hosea 12:6
Ephesians 6:10–20
Hebrews 4:14–16

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Deuteronomy 1–3
Mark 11:15–33

Practical religion, we have noted, is a special focus of the Apostle James in his epistle. Thus, we can count on him to tell us how we can make practical application of his teaching in our lives. His instruction in James 4:6 that God gives grace to the humble should encourage in us a desire to be humble people so that we will enjoy His gift of divine grace. In today’s passage, James begins to unfold for us what it means to be humble before God so that we put our desire for personal humility into practice.

Notably, James 4:6–10 has significant overlap with 1 Peter 5:5–9, leading many commentators to suggest that both letters might be including what was a common call to repentance and humility used throughout the early church. Regardless, the first thing that humble people do, James 4:7 says, is to submit themselves to God. The call to submission to the Lord is a call to willingly put ourselves comprehensively under His lordship. Elsewhere, Scripture tells us that the mind that is set on the sinful flesh and opposes God is the mind that will not submit to God and His righteous law. Therefore, humble people who submit to the Lord are people who seek to live their lives according to God’s law, who take the Scriptures as their only infallible rule of faith and practice. Humble people stand ready to hear and obey the commands of the Master.

Such submission entails also that we resist the devil (v. 7). We cannot have the law of God govern our lives if we yield ourselves to Satan’s evil. Resistance to the devil requires active standing against him, for he is on the prowl, looking for passive saints whom he can easily devour (1 Peter 5:8). We are to be alert, on the watch for his schemes, so that we may not become easy prey. In so doing, we can be confident that because we are on God’s side, Satan will flee as we resist him (James 4:7). Dr. R.C. Sproul observes that “Satan is not equal in power or authority to God. Though Satan is powerful, he is not invincible. He flees from saints wearing the armor of God who resist him.” Note that such resistance often includes escaping situations in which we are strongly tempted to sin (1 Cor. 10:13).

We must resist the devil but not the Lord. As we draw near to God, He will draw near to us (James 4:8). Drawing near, as we will see in our next study, involves drawing away from sin in repentance. Without repentance, we cannot enjoy warm fellowship with our Creator and the strength of His presence. **✠**

CALLED TO REPENTANCE

JAMES 4:8b–9 “Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.”



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

We as Christians are not immune from straying from the Lord and living as friends of the world. If we find ourselves doing this, we need to remember Jesus’ words: “Take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). We cannot renounce friendship with the world in our own strength, but as we draw near to God in repentance and submit to His will, we will find the world less attractive and our friendship with Him renewed.

Commenting on James 4:6–10, J.A. Motyer observes that “fellowship with God—and its consequent blessing of his fellowship with us—does not ‘just happen’; we cannot drift into it any more than we drift into holiness. It is our first obedience.” Walking with the Lord requires our purposeful action, and if we do not seek His face, the result will be disorder in the church (vv. 1–3) and a host of other errors listed in James 1–3. Unless we pursue friendship with God, we will fall into a friendship with the fallen world order and put ourselves at odds with our heavenly Father (4:4–5).

True Christians can at times live as if they were close friends with the world; thankfully, the Lord has more than sufficient grace available to solve this problem and enable us to enjoy the blessings of close friendship with God once again. This grace comes as we humble ourselves before the Lord, admit our need of His assistance, resist the devil, and draw near to God (vv. 6–8a). Certainly, this can happen only if there is a corresponding turn away from sin, and lest we think otherwise, James in today’s passage calls us to repent of our sin.

The Apostle uses Old Testament imagery in his call to repentance. Cleansing and purification were associated with the priests’ ceremonial washings and consecration of the tabernacle and temple (see Lev. 8:5–6; 2 Chron. 29:1–19). Over time, these images of cleansing and purification were used of moral renewal as well; “clean hands and a pure heart” belonged to those who have turned from sin in faith and repentance (Ps. 24:3–4). James 4:8b picks up on this language to exhort readers to incline their hearts away from evil and toward God (“purify your hearts”) and amend their deeds (“cleanse your hands”). John Calvin comments: “The true character of repentance . . . is not only an outward amendment of life, but its beginning is the cleansing of the heart. It is also necessary . . . that the fruits of inward repentance should appear in the brightness of our works.”

James 4:9 echoes texts such as Joel 2:12, which calls for a return to the Lord accompanied by mourning over sin, and it also alludes to passages such as Proverbs 10:23, which says that fools laugh at their sin. The Apostle seeks not to remove all the joy from the Christian life but to remind us that the joy of the Lord cannot be had when we are in impenitent sin. Authentic joy comes only to those who mourn their sin, turn from it unto God through Christ, and endeavor after new obedience. **✠**

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Psalm 51
2 Corinthians 7:10

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Deuteronomy 4–5
Mark 12:1–27

THE WEEKEND

Deuteronomy 6–11
Mark 12:28–13:31



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WEEKEND DEVOTIONAL
MARCH 7-8

THE PRIESTLY COLORS


JOHN C.A. FERGUSON

No expense was spared in making the high priest's garments. Made of the finest materials and threads dyed with the richest of colors, they must have been very impressive to the eye. The colors of the priestly garments also had a theme: The "gold, blue and purple and scarlet yarns, and fine twined linen" in the garments (Ex. 28:5) matched the furniture and fittings found in the tabernacle and temple fabric (ch. 26; 27:9-19; 2 Chron. 2:7).

Although we are not told why these specific colors were chosen, there are clues in other parts of the Bible as to their significance. The golden threads of the priestly garment remind us of the furniture within the tabernacle's innermost room (Ex. 25) and therefore of God's holy presence. Israelites fixed tassels with a blue cord to their garments to help them remember God's commandments (Num. 15:37-41). Purple is representative of royalty and reminds us that the priest was appointed by the sovereign God. Scarlet is the color of blood. It is also associated with sin (Isa. 1:18) and atonement, for the high priest took the blood of the sacrifices and sprinkled it on the mercy seat to atone for Israel's sins (Lev. 16). The bright white of bleached fine linen tells of purity (Isa. 1:18), righteousness (Rev. 19:8), and blessings that come from God (Ezek. 16:8-14).

The colors told of the Levitical priests' office and their high calling to faithfully serve God in Israel. They also anticipated the ultimate fulfillment of priestly service by a Great High Priest from a different line,

"after the order of Melchizedek" (Ps. 110:4; Heb. 7:15-28)—namely, Jesus Christ. We can think of how the same colors tell us of Christ's priestly work. Gold—Christ brings us into God's holy presence; blue—He kept God's commands and fulfills God's covenant with us; purple—He is the Most High King as well as the Great High Priest; scarlet—He shed His blood for the forgiveness of sins; white—His righteousness, sinlessness, and provision of blessing.

We also find personal applications from the priestly colors because through faith in Christ, "you are . . . a royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9) and a temple within which God's Holy Spirit dwells (1 Cor. 3:16). The colorful priestly threads are woven into Christian life through faithful words, works, and character. The priestly colors are a helpful way to remember our relationship with God through Christ. Gold—entering God's holy presence through Christ; purple—belonging to the King of kings; blue—remembrance of His commands; scarlet—sins washed away by the Savior's blood; white—blessings from God through the gospel: "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (Isa. 1:18), coupled with "the righteous deeds of the saints" (Rev. 19:8). That is the blessing of a life in keeping with the righteousness that has been counted to us through faith in Christ. 

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THE PATH TO EXALTATION

JAMES 4:10 “Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.”



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

God made human beings with the purpose of exalting them as rulers over creation who govern it to His glory. Thus, we have a built-in desire for exaltation, though it has been twisted by sin and perverted (Ps. 8). The only way to lasting exaltation, however, is to humbly submit ourselves to the Lord. John Calvin writes, “Whosoever, then, seeks a firm elevation, let him be cast down under a sense of his own infirmity, and think humbly of himself.”

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Proverbs 22:4
Isaiah 66:1–2
Luke 18:9–14
1 Peter 5:6–7

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Deuteronomy 12–13
Mark 13:32–14:9

All people will ultimately weep and mourn in relation to their sin. This is true even of those who never come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus warns us that among us there are “weeds,” those who actually belong to the devil and love their sin. On the last day, they will be cast “into the fiery furnace,” where “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” in sorrow and anger over their enduring judgment for never renouncing their sin and resting on God’s promises in Christ (Matt. 13:36–43). The only way to escape mourning on that day is to mourn over our sin in true repentance before we die. Such repentance occurs decisively in our conversion, wherein the Holy Spirit moves us to mourn our sin and renews our hearts so that we are steadfastly committed to Jesus in faith. Until the presence of sin is removed from us in our glorification, however, Christians sometimes stumble back into behavior that is in keeping with friendship with the fallen world. Therefore, repentance characterizes the whole of the Christian life. Those who have truly been born again will mourn their postconversion sin and repent, though their repentance is not always immediate (1 John 1:8–9).

This ongoing repentance is part of the humility to which James has been calling us (James 4:1–9). Only Christian humility can bring harmony and peace, ending the conflict that occurs in the church when we follow our ungodly passions (vv. 1–5). This is because we cannot achieve godly harmony with others apart from God’s grace, and God gives His grace only to those who humble themselves. This does not mean groveling before other people or viewing ourselves as worthless in comparison to others; rather, humility means accepting the truth about ourselves—that we are weak and dependent and can do nothing of ultimate value apart from Christ (John 15:5). It requires confession of our sin and drawing near to God to serve Him and His people (James 4:6–9).

Selfish pride is the antithesis of humility and is the way of the world (1 John 2:16). If we seek to exalt ourselves at the expense of others, we will produce only strife, and we will not enjoy a lasting exaltation anyway. But if we humble ourselves, God will exalt us (James 4:10). John Calvin comments: “We emulate and envy, because we desire to be eminent. This is a way wholly unreasonable, for it is God’s peculiar work to raise up the lowly, and especially those who willingly humble themselves.”

HOW TO SPEAK OF THE BROTHERS

JAMES 4:11–12 “Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge” (v. 11).

Quarreling because of unrestrained passions was a problem for many in the original audience of the epistle of James, and they were lapsing back into a friendship with the world (James 4:1–4). Thus, the Apostle gives instruction on how to live as friends of God and to restore peace to the church. To accomplish these goals, we must take advantage of the abundant grace that the Lord gives to His people by resisting the devil, repenting of our sin, and submitting ourselves to God’s reign by seeking to do what He commands (vv. 5–9). In other words, we need to humble ourselves, reject self-rule, and follow the dictates of King Jesus (v. 10; see 1:22–25; 2:8–13).

Today’s passage tells us that returning to God in humility, faith, and repentance must be accompanied by actions that promote harmony and unity, not fighting and division. James focuses on our speech again, directing us not to “speak evil against one another” (4:11). This emphasis makes sense, for in the heat of conflict, it is easy to fall into the use of personal insults and other sins of the tongue. James may have had in mind passages such as Leviticus 19:16, which prohibits slandering other believers, when he was writing this instruction. He almost certainly also had in view Jesus’ teaching against insulting other disciples (see Matt. 5:22).

James also tells us not to judge our brothers (James 4:11). He is not forbidding sober evaluation of others’ actions; rather, he means for us not to assume the right to determine the final spiritual end of others and not to judge other Christians as being in the wrong with God when they do not share our scruples about issues on which God has not spoken. Likely James is addressing a problem similar to what Paul deals with when he gives instruction on eating meat offered to idols. In warning us about judging other brothers, James is echoing Paul’s teaching that we are not allowed to pass judgment on fellow believers whose consciences lead them to disagree with us regarding biblically indifferent matters (see Rom. 14:1–12).

Finally, James notes that when we speak against and judge our fellow Christians, we speak against the law and usurp the prerogatives of the one true Judge of all (James 4:11–12). The law tells us not to slander, so when we slander, we are implicitly saying that the law is wrong, at least on that point. Moreover, we are standing in the place of God, who alone can judge a person’s destiny and his convictions about things regarding which God has left our consciences free.



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

Matthew Henry comments, “Since Christians are brethren, they should not defile nor defame one another.” Sometimes reports of the wrongdoing of others in the church must be given, but these should be given out of the motive of love for the offenders and for the church, not simply for the purpose of character assassination. We must guard against defaming other believers.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Psalms 140:11
Jeremiah 6:27–30
Ephesians 4:29
James 3:1–12

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Deuteronomy 14–16
Mark 14:10–31

THE ERROR OF PRESUMPTION

JAMES 4:13–14 “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit’—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.”



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

One of the best ways that we can cultivate humility before God and others in our hearts and lives is to remember our limitations and the shortness of our lives. We are but creatures, and it is vital that we remember that. There are so many things that we cannot do and cannot know, and this should lead us not to presume too much about tomorrow.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Psalm 39:4–6
Proverbs 27:1
Isaiah 40:6–8
Luke 12:13–21

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Deuteronomy 17–19
Mark 14:32–52

The sin of Adam and Eve consisted in their trying to take the Lord’s place as Judge and Lawgiver. By eating the forbidden fruit, our first parents implicitly said that they were not bound to God’s law and that He had no right to judge what is good and what is evil (Gen. 3:1–7). They attempted to cast off His authority, committing cosmic treason, as Dr. R.C. Sproul frequently said. Adam and Eve were the first to do this but not the last. James says that we do the same thing when we judge fellow Christians in matters on which God has left us free to make our own choices or when we revile other believers (James 4:11–12). God in His law condemns slandering other believers, and only He has the right to judge individuals in matters where He has left them free (see Lev. 19:16; Rom. 14). Let us strive not to usurp God’s place as Judge by our disobedience.

Slandering other believers and improperly judging them are not the only ways that we assume for ourselves prerogatives that belong to the Lord alone. We see that in today’s passage, as James begins to warn us against the error of presumption. James 4:13 addresses those who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit.” In the first-century Roman Empire, commercial activity was rapidly expanding, and many residents of the empire, including many Jews, took advantage of this through various business enterprises. It was easy for merchants to pridefully proclaim what their revenues and profits would be, their plans for buying and selling in other cities, and so on. Not much has changed, for modern people make prideful predictions as well.

In any case, James warns readers that such boasting is presumptuous, and the reason is that we do not know the future. We are finite, with our lives but a mist that appears suddenly and disappears almost as quickly (v. 14). Only the Lord knows the future certainly, declaring the end from the beginning (Isa. 46:8–10). Only He can confidently announce what is coming tomorrow. When we boast of the future without any reference to the Lord and His sovereign will, we are therefore attempting to usurp His place.

James does not condemn business owners merely for having a profit motive. As we will discuss in our next study, he also does not forbid wise planning for the future. He simply wants us to remember our own limitations and that the days ahead are unknown to us. **TC**

PLANNING IN LIGHT OF GOD’S PROVIDENCE

JAMES 4:15–16 “Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.’ As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.”

Christians are citizens of the kingdom of God, but that citizenship does not eliminate our responsibilities to our earthly neighborhoods, cities, and nations (e.g., see Rom. 13:1–7). Since we live in this world, this world can shape our thinking more than we recognize. It is easy for us to make plans for the future in ways that look like what secularized people do. How often do we prepare for tomorrow as if we knew for certain what will happen? Do we not sometimes set goals and then boast about how we will achieve them? Are we immune from establishing plans without bringing them to the Lord in prayer?

James 4:13–14 addresses this issue with respect to Christians engaged in commerce, though it can be applied in other areas as well. James has said that it is foolish for us to boast about tomorrow because we are limited creatures with short lifespans. In today’s passage, James develops his thoughts further by telling us how we should think about and plan for the future. As we make preparations, we should say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that” (v. 15).

The Apostle calls us not to abandon planning altogether but to make our plans in light of the providence of God. Scripture tells us that our plans will work out only according to the Lord’s sovereign will (Prov. 16:9; Eph. 1:11). This should not lead us into a fatalism that says that our plans and actions do not matter, but it should keep us humble people who hold on to our plans loosely and adapt readily when God directs things in ways that we have not anticipated. At all times we must remember, as Dr. R.C. Sproul writes, that “the primary consideration in all future planning is the will of the sovereign God.”

Having the right frame of heart and mind is more important than the phrase “if the Lord wills” itself. John Calvin says that James is really more concerned with our attitudes than with our precise words, noting that those firmly committed to divine sovereignty may at times speak as if they knew what will happen tomorrow. Calvin notes that while it is good to develop the habit of saying “if the Lord wills,” we cannot assume that omitting those words constitutes sin. The Reformer is undoubtedly correct. Phrases such as “God willing” or “if the Lord wills” can become mantras that we repeat without thinking. It is better to develop a conscious belief that God is sovereign over our lives and forget to say words such as “God willing” than to say them without really meaning it. **TC**



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

J.A. Motyer comments, “Too often Christians leave God in the church or at home . . . when they take the train to their offices.” As we go about our daily lives and make plans for the future, whether they involve our work lives or not, we can fail to take the Lord into account. May we be aware of His sovereign providence and seek to live all of life with the understanding that He directs whatsoever comes to pass.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Genesis 50:15–21
1 Samuel 2:22–25
Acts 16:6–10
1 Corinthians 4:19

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Deuteronomy 20–22
Mark 14:53–72

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GODLY CONTENTMENT

JOEL E. KIM

JAMES 4:17 “So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.”

CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

God’s commandments are comprehensive, each one telling us what we must do and what we must not do. One tool that helps us understand this is the Westminster Shorter Catechism, which explores what each of the Ten Commandments calls us to do and not to do. Using such resources can help us better understand the law so that we may sin less and less.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Leviticus 5:1
Matthew 21:28–32

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Deuteronomy 23–25
Mark 15:1–20

THE WEEKEND

Deuteronomy 26–31
Mark 15:21–16:20

By warning us about presuming too much about the future and encouraging us to make our plans in light of God’s sovereign providence, James has conveyed an essential point: We must remember who we are as limited creatures and take the Lord into account in all things (James 4:13–16). Given our propensity to live like practical atheists, James’ point is well taken. It is easy to attend church on Sunday and then forget God during the rest of the week. Whether our current vocation is as a homemaker, business owner, student, or employee, how often do we forget that we are to remember our Creator in our vocational life? After all, we are called to do all things to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). This makes it a sin to forget Him when we are outside the church walls and a transgression to make plans without reference to Him.

Now that James has warned us not to forget the Lord, we have no excuse if we continue to do so. That is the main point of today’s verse, where the Apostle says that “whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin” (James 4:17). We should know that we must take the Lord into account in all things, but since James makes the principle clear, we cannot plead ignorance if we do not follow through, though even ignorance would not excuse us. If we fail to consider the Lord when we make our plans even though we have been told to do so, we have disobeyed, committing what is called a sin of omission.

We readily recognize sins of commission, sins whereby we do something that God expressly forbids. An example of this in light of James 4:13–16 would be making plans to commit a known sin, such as defrauding people to make a living. We often fail to see our sins of omission whereby we fail to live up to the Lord’s standards, such as when we fail to make plans while conscious of divine providence. Moreover, we often see sins of omission as less significant than sins of commission. Scripture does not allow us to draw this conclusion. If we fail to do what we know that we are supposed to do, we sin.

As noted above, ignorance of the good that we are to do does not excuse our failure to do it. As we see in texts such as Luke 12:35–48, however, it is worse to know the good and fail to act. Augustine of Hippo writes: “Does the one who does not know how to do good and does not do it commit a sin? He certainly does, but the one who knows what is good and does not do it sins more grievously.”

Paul’s words in 1 Timothy 6:6 are both simple and profound: “Godliness with contentment is great gain.” In a culture that prizes achievement, accumulation, and accolades, contentment seems almost foreign. Yet Paul reminds us that true contentment is measured not by possessions or status but by a heart that rests entirely in God.

Jeremiah Burroughs called contentment “that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits and delights in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.” This is not resignation but Spirit-fueled trust. It is the believer’s joyful submission to God’s providence, whether in plenty or in want. Paul himself learned this lesson: “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content” (Phil. 4:11). Notice that word—*learned*. Contentment does not come naturally. Left to our own instincts, we want, long for, desire, and crave whatever we believe is essential to us. Instead, contentment is taught through God’s providential leading. The secret that Paul discovered is that in life, Christ is enough. When our identity and joy are anchored in Him, constantly changing circumstances lose their power to define us.

Paul identifies the root of the problem: “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils” (1 Tim. 6:10). Notice that he does not say that *money* is the root of all evil. The issue is not money itself but the heart’s craving for it. Greed blinds us from seeing our desires clearly. We rarely recognize it because we often compare ourselves to those around us, always finding someone with more. Discontentment is not about being rich or poor; it is about a restless heart seeking satisfaction,

and significance apart from God. This craving exposes our heart’s condition. When we look to other things for security or significance, we are actually breaking the first commandment. Discontentment often reveals what we actually worship instead of the God who deserves all our worship.

Then what does Paul teach about contentment? First, we must recognize our poverty: “We brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world” (1 Tim. 6:7). Recognizing our dependence on God humbles us and makes grace precious to us. Everything we have is a gift of grace. When we see life through this lens, gratitude replaces grumbling. Second, contentment rests in understanding *God’s providence*: “God . . . richly provides us with everything to enjoy” (1 Tim. 6:17). Romans 8:32 assures us that the One who gave His Son will graciously give us all things necessary for life and godliness. As Charles Spurgeon said, “Had any other condition been better for you than the one in which you are, divine love would have put you there.” Finally, contentment seeks God’s presence: Earthly goods fade, but God Himself is our portion forever (Ps. 73:25–26). When He is our treasure, His presence and promises are enough for us. Contentment is found in a changed heart—one captivated by Christ. In Him, we have everything. **✠**

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THE IMPERMANENCE OF EARTHLY WEALTH

JAMES 5:1-3 "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you" (v. 1).



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

Where do we place our ultimate trust? Because of the remaining presence of sin, we can fall into the trap of thinking that our riches provide some kind of ultimate security. We must avoid such thinking, for only the Lord is our shelter.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Proverbs 11:4
Ecclesiastes 6:1-2
Matthew 6:19-21
Luke 12:13-21

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Deuteronomy 32-33
Luke 1:1-38

The Apostle James has been reminding us that we should take God into account as we plan for the future. His words apply to all our plans, but he has focused especially on the plans of those who are engaged in commerce and seek to make a profit (James 4:13-17). James' teaching is part of his overall concern with poverty and wealth, one of the three main themes of his epistle. His discussion of wealth continues in today's passage.

James' tone takes a sharp turn in 5:1-3 as he issues a prophetic judgment on the rich that has much in common with the oracles of woe pronounced by the old covenant prophets. The difficulty here is in determining whether James is addressing believers or unbelievers. While there are good arguments to be made that James has wealthy believers in view, the evidence favors wealthy unbelievers as the target of his critique. The sudden shift in James' tone and lack of an explicit reference to the possibility of repentance makes it more likely that he has in view wealthy non-Christians who have been mistreating believers (see vv. 4-6). It might seem odd that James would direct his words to unbelievers in a letter meant to be read in the church, but it makes sense when we think about it. Christians who have little might be tempted to envy non-Christians who have great wealth, and James' calling for judgment on rich oppressors reminds believers that in the end, wealth will not save them, helping us not to envy. His words also remind us that God will avenge those who mistreat believers, helping us develop patience as we await that day (see vv. 7-11). Importantly, we remember also that the Old Testament prophets included oracles of judgment against the nations in their books even though their audience was primarily made up of old covenant believers (see Jer. 46-51).

As we will see in our next study, James is condemning not wealth in and of itself but rather the misuse of wealth. Those who engage in such misuse are apt to trust in that wealth to save them and to solve all their problems. Consequently, James stresses the impermanence of wealth. The fancy garments of rich oppressors are already rotted and moth-eaten (James 5:2). Of course, they were not really wearing clothes in such poor shape; James' description conveys the certainty of their eventual destruction, for decay comes to all things. He makes similar comments about gold and silver, which will not rescue them on judgment day (v. 3). **TC**

THE MISUSE OF WEALTH

JAMES 5:4-6 "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" (vv. 5-6).

Rich men and women who do not believe in Christ are the object of James' oracle of judgment in James 5:1-6. As we have seen in verses 1-3, the Apostle condemns these people because of their misplaced trust in their wealth, which is transitory. The corruption that their wealth suffers over time as part of the decay that affects all creation will actually be a testimony against them at the last day, its degradation bearing witness that they were foolish all along to trust in their riches to save them.

Verses 4-6, which we are considering in today's study, show us that James is addressing not the possession of wealth in itself but rather the misuse of that wealth. In the first-century Roman Empire, a small group of wealthy landowners was increasingly coming into possession of land. This created a situation in which many people had to hire themselves out as day laborers to these landowners. At the end of each day, the workers were to receive their wages, and it was especially vital that they be paid on time because they lived at a subsistence level. As we see in verse 4, however, many of the non-Christian wealthy landowners were holding back their wages. James condemns them for this mistreatment, for it violated biblical standards of justice (v. 4; see Deut. 24:15). James even warns that the workers' cries have come to the ears of the "Lord of hosts," which is a title that highlights God's incomparable power (James 5:4; see also Isa. 1:24). The impoverished Christians may suffer for a time, but ultimately they have the all-powerful Creator looking out for them, and He will not acquit those who mistreat His people. John Calvin comments, "They who have the power of doing wrong ought to abstain from injustice, lest they provoke God against them, who is the protector and patron of the poor."

James goes on to condemn the wealthy unbelievers for their luxury and self-indulgence (James 5:5). Scripture says that it is a gift of God to enjoy our possessions (Eccl. 5:19), so James cannot be condemning all personal enjoyment of one's wealth. He has in view those who make personal pleasure their supreme good, who indulge their every craving without giving thought to helping those in need. In our current era, when we are encouraged to live only for the moment and to satisfy our every desire, James' words should not be passed over quickly. Those who make an idol out of money and the goods and services that money can buy are fattening themselves up for slaughter on the last day (James 5:5). **TC**



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

God's Word gives us great freedom in determining how we spend our money, so we must be careful about not judging what others do with their possessions. At the same time, we should regularly consider what we do with our resources and what our use of our wealth might say about our hearts. God wants us to enjoy His good gifts and to be generous to others who need our help.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Proverbs 14:24;
22:16; 28:22
Ecclesiastes 5:10
1 Timothy 6:17-19

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Deuteronomy 34
Luke 1:39-56

PATIENTLY AWAITING THE LORD'S COMING

JAMES 5:7–8a “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.”



CORAM DEO

*Living before the
face of God*

The farming metaphor that James uses helps us see that patience does not mean inactivity. Farmers cannot make their crops grow, but they can work the soil, make preparations for future harvests, and more while they wait for the rains to do their work on the seed they have planted. Similarly, as we wait for Christ's return, we can pray for its coming, proclaim the gospel, disciple the nations, and faithfully serve in all the ways that God has called us to serve.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Deut. 11:13–15
Psalm 37
Mark 4:26–29
Romans 12:12

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Joshua 1–2
Luke 1:57–80

Some of the Christians to whom James wrote belonged to the middle class, and perhaps some of them were even wealthy. We learn as much from his directives concerning business, God's providence, and planning recorded in James 4:13–16. His words make no sense unless at least some of his original readers engaged in commercial enterprises and made a fairly good living. Others in James' original audience, however, lived in significant poverty and were exploited by wealthy non-Christian landowners. These individuals are personified as “the righteous person” who does not resist his oppressors (5:1–6). In reality, there was not much that they could do to gain relief given the political and social realities of their day.

One thing that these impoverished believers could do, however, was to respond with godly patience to their trials, and this is what James commends in today's passage. Specifically, James tells his readers to be patient “until the coming of the Lord” (v. 7). Here the Apostle makes another reference to the last day, associating it particularly with the return of Christ. Earlier he warned wealthy unbelievers that this last day will be a day of judgment and condemnation (vv. 1–6), but when he calls us to patience in light of the Lord's coming, he is exhorting us to see the last day as a day of victory and reversal of fortune. James' words are in keeping with those of the Old Testament prophets, who foresaw a day when all will be set right, when God's oppressed people will be exalted and rescued from their difficulties (Isa. 14:1–2; Mal. 4:1–3). James has returned to one of the main themes of his letter—responding rightly to trials (see James 1:2–4, 12)—looking to the certainty of the Lord's coming. Whatever the hardship we face in the present, knowing that Christ is returning to set all things right can help us patiently endure our troubles.

James uses an agricultural metaphor to underscore the certainty of the Lord's return and the benefits of patience. His original audience was familiar with the rainy season in the Holy Land, when the “early . . . rains” of autumn and the “late rains” of spring were vital for farming. The coming of these rains was sure to bring a harvest, but the farmers had to wait patiently for and through them until the earth yielded its fruit. In the same way, we must wait patiently for the return of Christ, which will certainly come and which will bring us final rescue from all our travails (5:7–8a). **TE**

THE NEARNESS OF THE LORD'S COMING

JAMES 5:8b–9 “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.”

Taking personal vengeance is a temptation for those who suffer unjustly, and no doubt the members of James' original audience who were being exploited by wealthy non-Christians at times felt that they should repay their oppressors in kind. As we have seen, however, the Apostle James counsels patience and not vengeance, for the Lord Jesus Christ is sure to return and will do a far better job of establishing justice than we ever could (James 5:1–8a). Having established the certainty of the Lord's coming as a basis for patience, James in today's passage looks to the nearness of Jesus' return as an encouragement to endure suffering.

James writes that we must “establish [our] hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand” (v. 8b). Here we see an expectation that the return of Jesus could happen at any moment, and indeed the nearness of Christ's second coming has always been a part of the Christian faith. Of course, it has been almost two thousand years since James wrote, which seems like a long time to wait for something that was near in the days of the Apostles. Yet regarding the nearness of Christ's return, we need to think in terms of a sequence of events, not the passage of time. To say that the Lord's coming is near is to say that it is the next milestone event to happen in the outworking of God's plan of salvation. In other words, what comes next in the redemption of creation is the return of Jesus. Many individuals, of course, have come and continue to come to saving faith between our Lord's ascension and His coming again, but with reference to our Creator's salvation of the entire church, only Jesus' second advent to consummate His kingdom remains. Thus, His return is near and could happen at any moment, even though from a temporal perspective, we do not know if it will happen after another hour, day, month, year, century, or millennium.

In light of the nearness of the Lord's coming, we are to establish ourselves in the faith, knowing that we can endure suffering because Jesus will reward us (v. 8b). We also are not to grumble and complain against each other because the Judge is soon to appear (v. 9). When we face hard times, we are apt to lash out at those close to us, so James' words are a needed warning. After all, our treatment of one another will be taken into account when the Lord graciously evaluates our works. If we lash out at others, our reward will be less than it would be otherwise (see 1 Cor. 3:10–15). **TE**



CORAM DEO

*Living before the
face of God*

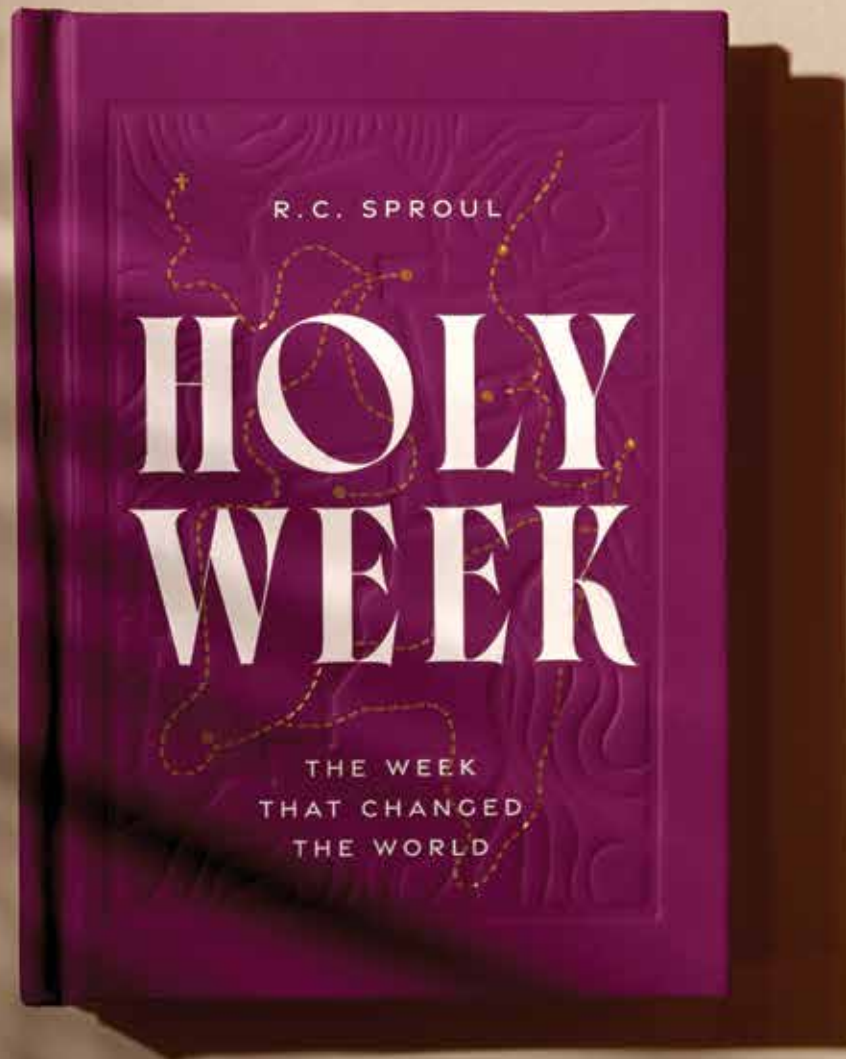
Even if we are not being exploited by non-Christians, we can still face challenges because of pressures at work, at school, and elsewhere. These challenges can make us prone to be impatient with and lash out at our friends, families, and fellow Christians. Let us ask the Lord to grant us patience and to help us understand how the nearness of His coming enables us to endure our suffering without hurting others.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Numbers 13:1–14:38
Proverbs 19:13
Philippians 2:14–16
Revelation 22:20

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Joshua 3–4
Luke 2:1–21



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JAMES 5:10–11 “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.”



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

God promises a great blessing to those who wait on Him, trusting that He will set all things right (Isa. 40:27–31). Such waiting is hard, but the Spirit will enable us to be patient as we think on the Lord’s righteous character and His sure promise to reward all those who patiently endure suffering, looking to Him as their ultimate Rescuer.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Proverbs 11:19
Revelation 3:7–13

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Joshua 5–6
Luke 2:22–52

THE WEEKEND

Joshua 7–10
Luke 3

The certainty and nearness of the return of Jesus should motivate us to patiently endure our trials and tribulations (James 5:1–9). Of course, this does not mean that God forbids all attempts to alleviate suffering or to escape tribulation. Other passages of Scripture tell us to improve our lot if we are able to do so (e.g., 1 Cor. 7:21). The point, rather, is that we should take our eyes off personal vengeance and not allow our difficulties to make us grumble against others (James 5:7–9). Knowing that Christ will soon set all things right can help us fulfill those directives.

Continuing his exhortations to patience, James in today’s passage directs us to Old Testament examples of individuals who suffered patiently and experienced blessing. First, the Apostle reminds us of “the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord” (v. 10). James does not tell us exactly whom he has in mind, but we can think of someone such as Jeremiah, who was imprisoned in the king’s palace, cast into a cistern, and eventually dragged off to Egypt because he continued to proclaim the oracles of judgment against Judah that God gave him (Jer. 32:1–2; 38:1–13; 43:1–7). James may also be thinking of Isaiah, who was sawn in two according to a Jewish tradition apparently endorsed in Hebrews 11:37. It might be hard for us to consider the sufferings of these prophets and others and regard those men as blessed, but we should remember Jesus’ words in Matthew 5:11–12 that those who are reviled and persecuted for Christ’s sake are blessed because they are experiencing the same things as the prophets and will receive a great reward. James almost certainly had these words of Jesus in mind when he wrote today’s passage.

James also gives us Job as an example of the patient saint whose steadfastness is rewarded. Job might seem an odd choice to illustrate patience, for the book that bears his name records his frequent complaints to God about his suffering. Importantly, however, Job never abandoned his faith during his ordeal, and in fact we see that by the end of his story, his faith is more perfected than at the start, for he comes to confess the power and goodness of our inscrutable Creator (Job 42:1–6). The endurance that Job acquired is itself a blessing, but we also note that he received twice as much as he had before his trial because of his patient endurance (vv. 10–17). **✠**



GETTING READY FOR WORSHIP

TESSA THOMPSON

When I was a teenager, “getting ready for church” mainly consisted of picking out a cute outfit and grabbing my Bible on my way out the door. Fast-forward a couple of decades, and Sunday preparations involve a lot more than ironing a dress. Getting out the door with bread for the Lord’s Supper, children dressed in clean clothes, and a meal prepared for hospitality means that Saturday is a day of forethought and hard work.

If I’m honest, it’s great to walk out the door feeling ready for the day. Is the slow cooker set to low? *Check.* Child number 2 needs a pencil to take notes? *Check. I’ve got three.* There are many ways that we can be externally prepared, and giving thought to these things can indeed reflect a high view of the Lord’s Day, which is good and right. If I’m running around trying to find matching shoes at 8:55, it’s a lot more likely that I’ll arrive to worship with a frazzled heart.

Yet detailed external preparations do not magically guarantee the inward preparation of the heart. My Bible may be packed and my slow cooker full, but what is the condition of my heart toward God and His people? Getting out the door for church does not cause the daily burdens we carried the preceding week to magically disappear. And Sunday is undoubtedly Satan’s favorite day to make those burdens feel especially heavy so as to make our hearts cold and hard.

Speaking of the Pharisees in Matthew 15:8, Jesus said, “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.” We may not be worshipping God “in

vain” (v. 9) in the same way that the Pharisees were, but even if we have our doctrine settled, it’s entirely possible to arrive at worship and go through the motions with hearts far from God.

We desperately need the Holy Spirit to help us fight against this, and one of the best ways that we can do that is by taking time to ask God to make us *hungry for the feast* and *humble for the fellowship*.

Lord’s Day worship—singing, corporate prayer, Scripture reading, preaching, and sacraments—ought to be a feast for our souls. One way to come hungry is by reading in advance the passage that will be preached, or even going over the whole liturgy if it’s available. Think of any questions you might have. If it’s a familiar passage, pray that God would open it up in a deeper way. Confess your lack of understanding or interest. Name the present burdens that may distract you during worship and entrust them afresh to the Lord.

One of the outworkings of true humility is love for God’s people, even those who are awkward or unlikable. It’s easy to turn inward and let both pride and preference shape our interactions on Sunday. We can pray beforehand that *providence* would instead direct our fellowship, even if that means getting out of our comfort zone or missing a conversation with a close friend. And then we can be expectant that God will actually answer those prayers. **✠**

TESSA THOMPSON is author of *Laughing at the Days to Come: Facing Present Trials and Future Uncertainties with Gospel Hope*.

JAMES 5:12 "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."



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

Dr. R.C. Sproul comments, "The Christian is expected to be a person whose word can be trusted." Ultimately, that is what James is telling us in today's verse. Oaths and vows are appropriate on solemn occasions, but not for everyday use, for God expects us not to need them to keep everyday promises. It is better not to swear at all than to swear an oath that we do not intend to keep.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Numbers 30:1–2
Psalm 119:106
Matthew 5:33–37
Hebrews 6:13

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Joshua 11–12
Luke 4:1–41

Poor Christians who are being mistreated by wealthy unbelievers are not to take personal vengeance or grumble against one another. Instead, they are to patiently wait for the Lord's return to set things right, just as farmers wait for harvest, imitating the steadfastness of the prophets and Job (James 5:1–11). Such waiting does not entail doing nothing or mean that any attempt to alleviate suffering is wrong. After all, farmers continue to work their fields in various ways as they wait for their crops to mature. The point is that we are not to let our suffering turn us against others or take away our faith in our good and gracious God.

In today's verse, James appends a warning about oaths to his teaching on Christian patience (v. 12). Commentators differ as to why James would put this instruction here. The most likely explanation is that the poor Christians who were being oppressed by wealthy unbelievers would have been tempted to swear oaths that they were unlikely to be able to keep when they promised to repay debts. Whatever the case may be, James' words must guide us today.

First, James cannot be forbidding all oaths, for the Apostles made oaths and vows under some circumstances (e.g., see Acts 18:18). Moreover, Scripture generally assumes that people should make vows; what we cannot do is swear by God's name falsely (Lev. 19:12). What, then, is James doing? John Calvin says that James reproves those "who taught that they could swear with impunity, provided they adopted some circuitous expressions." James is dealing with the same kind of thing that Jesus addresses when He calls out the Pharisees in Matthew 23:16–22. Many Pharisees had the idea that one did not really have to keep an oath if it had been sworn not in God's name but in the name of something associated with the Lord. They developed an elaborate moral framework whereby they gave themselves permission to break their vows as long as they did not expressly use the name of God in swearing.

This practice missed the point. We are not to swear oaths casually or make them in such a way that we think we can break them with impunity. Only God can perfectly hold us accountable for keeping our promises. We ultimately speak falsely against God, thereby committing blasphemy, when we think that leaving His name out of an oath renders Him unwilling or unable to hold us to account for our word. We must keep our godly promises. 📖

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



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

The Christian is to live all of life with a Godward focus, remembering the Lord in both good times and bad. Making sure to pray for God's help when we are ill and to praise Him when we are cheerful can help us keep the Lord foremost in our thinking and live all of life in a way that honors Him.

Our need to respond to the trials of life appropriately so that we develop steadfastness and a mature faith is one of the main emphases of the book of James, being the very first topic that the Apostle addresses in his letter (James 1:2–4). Much of the last chapter of James deals with the same issue, and we have thus far read about what we should do when we are suffering at the hands of non-Christians, especially in cases of economic exploitation (5:1–12). In today's verse, the Apostle switches to trials associated with illness and sin, beginning a section that deals mainly with physical suffering and troubles associated with transgression.

James 5:13 begins with a question: "Is anyone among you suffering?" If we reply with a yes, James counsels us: "Let him pray." The word "suffering" is broad in scope, and it can refer to suffering persecution for the sake of the gospel, suffering exploitation and injustice, suffering with an illness, and more. Thus, James' words apply to any instance of suffering. The immediate context and its focus on sickness, however, indicates that James primarily has the suffering associated with physical ailments in view (see vv. 14–16).

Going to the Lord in prayer when we are ill or injured should be our immediate response. Sadly, however, we sometimes think of prayer as a last resort. Often, the first thing we do is to call the doctor or begin taking medication. Modern medicine, of course, is one tool that our good Lord has providentially given to help us get well, so there is no shame in using physicians, surgeries, medications, and so on. Paul even commends the medicinal use of wine in 1 Timothy 5:23. We err, however, if all we do is to make use of the natural remedies available to us and do not call on the Lord who has ordained the discovery of these remedies and who can also provide supernatural assistance. Moreover, James' teaching that trials can mature us in our faith tells us that when we are ill or injured, we should pray not only for a physical recovery but also for the grace and strength to endure and learn from our physical trials (see James 1:2–4).

James goes on to tell those who are not suffering but cheerful that they should sing praise (5:13). This is not to say that one should not sing while suffering. Because it can be easy to forget the Lord when things are going well (see Deut. 8:11–20), it is particularly important for us to praise God during years of abundance so that we remember that it all comes from Him. 📖

FOR FURTHER STUDY

2 Chronicles 32:24
Nehemiah 9:26–27
Psalm 9:1–2
1 Corinthians 14:15

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Joshua 13–14
Luke 4:42–5:26



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PRAYER FOR THE SICK

JAMES 5:14–15 “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.”



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

When we look at Scripture’s teaching on healing and prayer, we must always balance several truths: God is able to heal; sometimes God does not heal because we do not ask Him to heal; God is willing to heal; and God heals according to His sovereign plan. This should move us to pray for healing, all the while understanding that our prayer does not force God’s hand and that we are to trust Him whether or not He heals us physically.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

2 Kings 4:8–37
Isaiah 38
Mark 6:7–13
Acts 28:8

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Joshua 15–17
Luke 5:27–39

Steadfastness in our faith is produced as we endure our trials in a God-centered manner, patiently awaiting the last day when the Lord will set everything right and asking Him for grace and strength to endure and to learn from our suffering (James 1:2–4; 5:7–13). None of this means that we should remain passive in our pain or that we would be wrong ever to look for our particular trials to end. James makes this point in today’s passage as he continues to present some practical ways to respond to tribulation.

In James 5:13, the Apostle called for prayer during suffering, focusing particularly, but not exclusively, on physical illness. James goes further in verse 14 to address situations in which physical sickness calls for a special intervention by the church’s elders. He envisions a situation in which sick people call on the elders to visit, which indicates that these individuals are likely suffering serious illness that makes it impossible for them to travel. According to today’s passage, the elders are to come, anoint the sick person with oil (olive oil), and pray for the individual’s healing. Some commentators have argued that James calls for oil because ancient people used it medicinally, but his use of the term “anointing” points us in a different direction. Old covenant priests and kings were anointed to consecrate them to God (e.g., Ex. 28:41; 1 Sam. 16:13). Similarly, the anointing that James has in view, when coupled with prayer, sets the sick person apart to the Lord as an object of His special care and empowerment.

James says that when the elders anoint sick individuals and pray for them in faith, the ill people will be made well (James 5:15). Certainly, the Apostle cannot mean that physical healing will occur every time that the elders pray for someone. Paul prayed in faith for God to remove the “thorn” in his flesh, but God did not do so (2 Cor. 12:7–9). We must take the words of James about the elders’ prayers in concert with his words about God’s sovereign will (James 4:13–17). Thus, James means that God answers the prayers of the elders with physical healing when He has sovereignly ordained to do so. Moreover, the sins that caused the physical ailment will be forgiven (5:15), but note that while some sins can lead to physical sickness, not every illness results from a particular sin, as the book of Job tells us. We can also be sure that God always forgives a repentant person even if He does not heal every physical ailment (1 John 1:8–10). **TC**

CONFESSION, PRAYER,
AND HEALING

JAMES 5:16a “Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.”

Elders of the church, we have seen, may be called on in the case of severe illness to anoint and pray for the sick (James 5:14–15). Very clearly, the purpose of this is for physical healing, so the book of James does not provide a basis for the Roman Catholic sacrament known as extreme unction or anointing of the sick, which is performed when a person is close to death. Its intent is not so much to bring physical healing but to prepare the individual for dying. Roman Catholic theologians try to ground their teaching on James 5:14–15, but that is a distortion of James’ intent. Yet this is not the only text in James used wrongly to support Roman Catholic sacramental practice. Today’s verse is sometimes cited as at least a partial justification for the Roman Catholic sacrament of penance, wherein a person makes private confession of sin to a priest to receive divine forgiveness.

While the sacrament of penance is unbiblical and private confession to a clergyman is not required by the Scriptures, this does not mean that confessing one’s sin to other people is inherently a bad idea. In fact, as we see in James 5:16a, confessing our sins to one another and praying for one another are sound practices if we understand them appropriately. Looking to the whole scope of Scripture, we see that confessing our sins to one another is done not really to secure God’s forgiveness but so that others will pardon us for the wrongs we have committed against them (e.g., see Matt. 18:21–22). If our sins against one another go unaddressed, they can destroy a church, so offenders should confess to the offended party in order to receive the healing of forgiveness that maintains peace and wholeness in the church. At times, the offended party may even need to go to the offender (v. 15), but we should also note that those who have been sinned against are not called to point out every misdeed. Minor sins are to be covered with love, the offended party releasing the offender even if he never confesses his sin (1 Peter 4:8). It takes godly wisdom to do all this rightly, so it is good to get counsel from people who know the full breadth of Scripture’s teaching on sin and forgiveness well and take all of it into account before confessing sin or confronting an offender.

The goal in all this is to foster healing (James 5:16a). Those who have been sinned against must be willing to forgive if an offender is truly penitent, and offenders must not downplay their sin. **TC**



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

Churches should be the safest places for people to confess their sins to each other. Regrettably, however, confessions of sin are not always kept private when they should be, some offenders use apologies to manipulate people, and some offended people are unwilling to extend forgiveness even when the sinner is truly repentant. As we are able, let us live in such a way to help make our churches safe for confessing and forgiving sin.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Genesis 50:15–21
2 Corinthians 2:5–11
Ephesians 4:32
Colossians 3:12–13

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Joshua 18–19
Luke 6:1–26

JAMES 5:16b–18 “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.”



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

Elijah’s story shows us also the importance of persevering in prayer, for he had to pray repeatedly for the drought to end in ancient Israel (1 Kings 18:41–46). Sometimes we do not see the power of prayer because we pray once or twice and then give up. Yet effectual prayer sometimes involves not only praying according to God’s will but also persevering in prayer over time. Let us not grow weary in praying until we get an answer.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Proverbs 15:29
Luke 18:1–8

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Joshua 20–22
Luke 6:27–49

THE WEEKEND

Joshua 23–Judges 3
Luke 7:1–8:3

As we have seen, James 5 focuses on the trials we face as Christians and how to respond to them appropriately by not grumbling against one another but with patience, confession of sin, and prayer (vv. 1–16a). Certainly, these are not passive responses. They are also not immediate “fixes,” as it were, for our trials; thus, it can be easy to think that they are not effective methods for dealing with tribulation. Human beings, after all, like solutions that “work” right away, and we often look for our own practical efforts to solve our problems. In light of this, it makes sense that James would stress the power of prayer in today’s passage (vv. 16b–18). Prayer is not an ineffectual response in our suffering; rather, “the prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.”

Believers must take James’ words to heart. Prayer is not a futile exercise, a mere expression of our wishes to the ether. Instead, prayer is our living connection to the Lord God Almighty, the One who has the power to bring whatever He wills into existence (Rom. 4:17; Heb. 1:3). Nothing is too difficult for Him (Jer. 32:17). Prayer is powerful not in itself but because it calls on the all-powerful Creator of all things. Furthermore, it is not just the prayers of any person that have great power but the prayers of a righteous person. James does not mean that we must be perfect or that our own obedience makes prayers effective. John Calvin explains that James “names expressly the prayer of a righteous or just [person]; because God does not hear the ungodly; nor is access to God open, except through a good conscience: not that our prayers are founded on our own worthiness, but because the heart must be cleansed by faith before we can present ourselves before God. Then James testifies that the righteous or the faithful pray for us beneficially and not without fruit.”

To illustrate the power of prayer, James turns to the Old Testament and the example of the prophet Elijah, whose prayers initiated and brought to an end a severe drought in ancient Israel (1 Kings 17:1–7; 18:41–46). James stresses that Elijah is “a man with a nature like ours” to help us understand that his prophetic office did not make his prayers more powerful than ours. Although we are not prophets, our prayers are as effective as those of Elijah—a believer like us—when offered according to God’s will from hearts that know the Lord Jesus. Again, this is because the power of our prayers comes from the One to whom they are addressed: our omnipotent Creator. **TL**



WEEKEND DEVOTIONAL

MARCH 28–29

SLANDER, BACKBITING, AND TALEBEARING

AARON L. GARRIOTT

Few sins feel as ordinary—and yet are as destructive—as slander, backbiting, and talebearing (see Westminster Larger Catechism 145). Because these sins often occur in casual conversation rather than in formal accusations, they easily pass unnoticed. Yet these sins of the tongue strike at the heart of Christian charity and peace.

Slander seeks to damage a person’s reputation through falsehood. Augustine warned that when Satan cannot devour a believer through open sin, he often turns to the subtler weapon of calumny—either by sully-ing a good name or by sowing suspicion in the hearts of others. He knew that a good name is fragile. Shakespeare captured the devastation well: To steal a purse is trivial; to steal a reputation is to impoverish the soul. Slander does not enrich the slanderer; it only ruins the slandered.

Backbiting differs slightly. It involves speaking unnecessarily of another’s faults, even when the information is true. Truth alone does not justify speech. Love stewards truth. Speaking what is true without necessity or charity violates the command to cover a neighbor’s sin rather than broadcast it. But a malicious heart and a slandering tongue often dwell together.

The ninth commandment exposes how seriously God regards these sins. Slander differs from false witness in setting: one occurs in ordinary life, the other in court. But the moral substance is the same—malice joined to falsehood. Matthew Henry pressed this further, warning that reputations are as vulnerable in conversation as lives are in the courtroom. What makes slander espe-

cially cruel is that it offers little chance for redress. A whispered accusation often travels farther and faster than a public defense.

We need to be warned against not only speaking slander but listening to it. To receive malicious speech is to participate in it. Slander wounds not only the accused but the hearer as well. Thus, the sin compounds. As Paul says, those who bite and devour one another risk being consumed by one another (Gal. 5:15).

Talebearing—what we commonly call gossip—extends this destruction further. Gossip traffics in information to which the hearer has no rightful claim. The gossip becomes an unauthorized steward of another’s story. Often overlooked, however, is the guilt of the gossip-listener. But it is as foolish to believe every tale as it is sinful to spread one. Wisdom examines reports carefully and refuses to delight in scandal. Indeed, we should remember that a person who gossips to you will likely gossip about you.

Augustine was correct. Yet perhaps even more so in our day than in his, reputations are easily shattered. Information travels at light speed. Even so, Christians are called to be reputation repairers, not destroyers. To guard our tongues is to love our neighbor. To refuse slander—spoken or heard—is to resist the devil himself. Too often, however, Christians participate in Satan’s work. Brothers, these things ought not to be so. **TL**

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SAVING A SOUL FROM DEATH

JAMES 5:19–20 “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.”



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

Dr. R.C. Sproul comments: “The care of the souls of the community is a matter of concern for every member, not only church officers or the clergy. Mutual help and encouragement are required.” God calls all of us to play a part in the care of souls, according to our various callings and giftings. We can reach out to erring brothers and sisters ourselves, and we can also call on the leaders of the church to get involved.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Ezekiel 34
Hosea 3
Luke 15:1–10
Jude 20–23

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Judges 4–5
Luke 8:4–39

Today we come to the final verses of the book of James and the conclusion of the Apostle’s exhortation to the church. Unlike most of the other letters in the New Testament, James does not end with personal greetings but with guidance for what to do if someone in the church “wanders from the truth” (James 5:19–20). His instruction may seem abrupt, but his words make good sense in context. James has been explaining the right way to respond to our trials and tribulations, and sometimes a professing Christian under the pressure of suffering will abandon the faith entirely or embrace false teaching. Thus, a word regarding what to do in such cases fits this section of James quite well.

What are we to do when we see someone wandering into soul-damning error? We are to seek to bring that person back to the truth, which today’s passage assumes. James no doubt had the teaching of Jesus in view when he wrote the last words of his epistle. Our Lord makes clear that there is great rejoicing whenever a shepherd goes after a sheep that has gone astray and rescues it from danger (Matt. 18:10–14). The shepherd rejoices, of course, because the sheep is back safe in the fold. James does not mention rejoicing explicitly, though we may assume its presence in his words implicitly. Instead, James stresses that when we bring a sinner back from his wandering, we save that person’s soul from death and cover a multitude of sins. Of course, James does not mean that we literally save souls ourselves but means that the Lord is pleased to work in and through our efforts to change hearts and bring reconciliation. John Calvin comments that it is “not that we can bestow salvation on them; but that God by our ministry delivers and saves those who seem otherwise to be in destruction.”

Stories of successful rescue missions thrill our souls, and rightly so. But the greatest rescue mission in history is God’s saving His people from sin, death, and Satan. In His kindness, our great Lord has granted us a part to play in this mission as we reach out with compassion and truth to those who have wandered from the truth, reminding them of the gospel and pleading with them to return. No enterprise is more worth our time than this, and the rescue has everlasting implications. Calvin writes, “Nothing is better or more desirable than to deliver a soul from eternal death; and this is what he does who restores an erring brother to the right way.”

DOING TO AVOID SELF-DECEPTION

JAMES 1:22 “Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”

We have reached the end of our study of the book of James, and we pray that it has benefited you. This epistle gives much instruction on the practice of authentic Christianity, and we ignore it to our peril.

James 1:22 gives us one main idea that unites all of James’ teaching on the various topics that the Apostle addresses: “Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” More than anything else, James wants our actions to match our profession, for our deeds to line up with the truths that we claim to believe. The Christian faith is not a collection of truths that we believe with our hearts and minds but that have no impact on our lives. Instead, authentic Christianity encompasses both faith and practice. If the truths that we claim to believe do not shape our actions, we do not actually believe them and our religion is worthless. Thus, we must not only hear the Word of God but do or obey it as well.

Doing the Word means that we put our confidence in the Lord’s power and goodness into practice by asking for His good gifts with sincere faith, mortifying any doubts that God will bless us with wisdom and endurance (vv. 1–18). To do the Word and not walk away from hearing it unchanged, we are to be quick to hear and slow to anger, seeking to remain undefiled as we bridle our tongues and care for orphans and widows (vv. 19–27). Doers of the Word do not show partiality, and they understand that all of God’s law of liberty applies to us, not just parts of it (2:1–13). True faith, in fact, bears the fruit of obedience. Our good works are not the grounds of our salvation, but individuals with authentic saving faith do good works, maturing in our friendship with God as we serve both Him and our neighbor (vv. 14–26). When we do the Word, we are careful with what we say and look for our words and our actions to be informed by the wisdom from above, which is a gift of God (ch. 3). Furthermore, doers of the Word flee worldliness, submit to God, resist the devil, and do not boast about tomorrow but humbly trust in divine providence (ch. 4). Finally, doers of the Word endure suffering with patience and prayer, keeping their promises and seeking to restore people who wander from the truth (ch. 5).

Doing the Word requires much of us, but God has brought us to new spiritual life and granted us the strength to obey (1:18). Trusting in Christ alone, let us walk by the Spirit and do the Word.



CORAM DEO

Living before the face of God

God by His grace has brought us to faith and united us to Christ. By that same grace, He both commands believers to be doers of the Word and grants us the willingness and ability to obey Him. When we fall short—and we will—His grace remains on us and we are to repent and endeavor after new obedience. Let us identify one area in which we have not been doers of the Word, repent, and seek to obey, asking the Lord to enable us to serve Him.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Deuteronomy 29:29
Proverbs 3:1
Matthew 7:24–27
1 John 5:3

THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Judges 6–7
Luke 8:40–56



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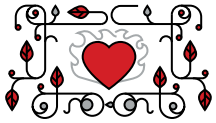


RADIO



DAILY EMAIL

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God Is My Portion Forever

CONRAD MBEWE

THE BOOK OF PSALMS continues to be a great help to believers around the world and across the ages because many saints identify with both the struggles and the victories described therein. Psalm 73, written by Asaph, is no exception. I want us to consider the words found in verse 26 of that psalm: “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” Why is Asaph speaking about the failing of his flesh and heart? It is because of the circumstances in his life that he alluded to in the first part of the psalm. He began by saying: “Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked” (vv. 1–3).

What an admission. The psalmist began with how he felt at the time of writing, after a season when he almost gave up the faith. He was now in a position to acknowledge God’s goodness to His people. Yet the psalmist quickly stated that as true as this might have been, he had almost backslidden as he compared his outward circumstances with those of sinners around him. They were bulging

with prosperity while he was withering because of his trials in life (vv. 4–15). He had even begun to secretly envy the wicked.

We may not want to state this publicly, but difficult circumstances in life cause us, like Asaph, to ask heart-searching questions that can bring us to the brink of unbelief. Does God really exist, or could there be another viable explanation for our existence? If He really exists, does He care about morality in the world? Could it be that it does not matter how a person lives? That might explain why wicked people are prospering. Such thoughts can make our hearts fail, as was the case with Asaph.

The psalmist, however, ultimately realizes, “God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (v. 26). This lifesaving contrast started when Asaph entered God’s presence and light shone through the darkness (vv. 16–17). From that point on, although his outward circumstances remained the same, he became a totally different man. He was able to see the end from the beginning. He realized that the wicked were being fattened for the day of slaughter. It was folly to envy them. He rebuked himself for his spiritual blindness. He said that he was like a beast—a creature of mere instinct—toward God (vv. 21–22).

Only God can bring about this seismic change in perspective. Asaph’s feet had almost slipped, but God held him up. The word that Asaph used for “strength” in Hebrew is the word translated elsewhere as “rock” (e.g., Ps. 18:2). It evokes the contrast of standing or building on rock, which is solid, versus building on sand, which is perilous. Only solid rock can hold us up when the rains come down like a flood and the howling winds are blowing like a hurricane. In New Testament language, Christians can say with the hymn writer Edward Mote, “On Christ, the solid rock, I stand; all other ground is sinking sand.” The Hebrew word also speaks of a refuge such as a fortress or a stronghold. We can hide and rest in God as we walk through the storms of life.


Note that before making this final conclusion, Asaph explained the unique relationship that God has with His people that far outweighs what sinners find in earthly pomp and pleasures. He wrote: “Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory” (Ps. 73:23–24). These words speak of God’s reassuring presence, His upholding mercy, His wise counsel, and His persevering grace. In the darkest moments of a person’s life, these realities are the impregnable foundation and the strong refuge that money cannot buy.

Asaph calls God his portion. That has reference to a treasure that is divided out and brings great joy. So the greatest treasure that we have as Christians in this life is summarized in the words spoken by God: “I am

continually with you.” I love the way that these words shine with unique brightness in the words of God spoken through Isaiah: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you” (Isa. 43:2).

In the light of this truth, we can well understand Asaph’s saying: “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Ps. 73:25–26). He was essentially saying: “All I care about now is being in ongoing fellowship with the living God. Come and get even the shirt on my back if you want,

but leave me with God. He is all I want, and He is all I need.” It may not take away the trouble, but it gives God’s child buoyancy in the storm.

If you are going to enjoy a true buoyancy of spirit in suffering, you must concentrate on the God who is sovereign over all affairs of this world. You need to look above the blood, sweat, and tears of this life and fix your eyes on this God who promises to be with His people in all circumstances. Make Him your portion. It is what John Newton had in mind when he wrote in his hymn, “Begone, unbelief, my Savior is near, and for my relief will surely appear: By prayer let me wrestle, and he will perform; with Christ in the vessel, I smile at the storm.” 

THE GREATEST TREASURE THAT WE HAVE IN THIS LIFE IS SUMMARIZED IN THE WORDS SPOKEN BY GOD: “I AM CONTINUALLY WITH YOU.”

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All Theology Is Practical Theology

JOHN CURRIE

ALL THEOLOGY IS PRACTICAL theology. This was the conviction of the Westminster divines when they penned their catechetical answer to the question, “What do the Scriptures principally teach?” The answer, in both the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, was theology *and* practice: “The Scriptures principally teach, what man is *to believe concerning God*, and what *duty* God requires of man” (WLC 5; WSC 3).

In this answer, the divines followed in the footsteps of John Calvin, who wrote his magisterial *Institutes of the Christian Religion* not merely as a “sum of Christian doctrine” but also as instruction on how this doctrine affects the Christian life. Calvin stressed that he was expounding “a doctrine not of the tongue but of life,” and his *Institutes* not only is threaded with pastoral and practical insights but features several chapters on the practical implications of his theology. We see this most notably in its seventy pages on prayer.

Better still, the Westminster divines followed the Scriptures themselves, which, for example, commend Ezra for his heart not only to study God’s Word and teach it but also *to do it* (Ezra 7:10). Similarly, Timothy is commanded to *teach and practice* sound

doctrine (1 Tim. 4:6–16) as he is reminded that the very nature of the Scriptures is to be put into practice (2 Tim. 3:16–17). Theology, insofar as it is the theology of the Scriptures, teaches us what *to believe* and *do* before the face of God.

For this reason, pastoral training often includes a distinct discipline called *practical theology*. All too often, this discipline functions under the assumption that what is learned in theology class is inherently impractical and that, to be effective in ministry, one must get past being theological and get practical about how the church actually works. But genuine practical theology ought to be (as it was with Calvin and the divines) the organic application of theological study to the pulpit, soul care, evangelism, worship, and any other expression of walking and working for God’s glory as God’s people.

For example, bibliology (the doctrine of the Scriptures) ought to structure and regulate homiletics (the discipline of preaching). What we *believe* about the Bible ought to determine what we *do* with the Bible. As John MacArthur expressed it, “Don’t tell me what you believe about the Bible; let me hear you preach, and I’ll tell you what you believe about the Bible.” Likewise, bib-

lical anthropology (the doctrine of man), hamartiology (the doctrine of sin), and soteriology (the doctrine of salvation) ought to form the content and the authority that govern the private ministry of the Word to those who are suffering and fighting sin. “All theology is practical theology” means that if we confess the doctrines of Scripture formally as a church, we must apply our theology functionally to the life of our church.

In no setting is this more important than the leadership of the church, who make decisions and set direction for God’s people. Busy leaders can grow impatient with the reflection and deliberation necessary to discern the theological foundations and implications related to

agenda items in a given meeting. Yet doctrine ought to have a norming influence on decisions and directions for the church. Who we believe Christ to be (Christology), not least in His exaltation as King and Head over the church, must affect the posture of an elder’s heart as he considers the servant nature of the leadership entrusted to him. What the Scriptures reveal about what Christ has created His church to be and do (ecclesiology) ought to provide a standard by which patterns of ministry are discerned to be profitable or even permitted for Christ’s bride. A scriptural understanding of where history is in terms of God’s plan for His people (eschatology) should inform leaders in whether and how to guide God’s people to engage with cultural issues in their time. To be sure, every meeting of a congregation’s leadership ought not to approximate a historic council. Thinking faithfully about doctrine does not require every church leader to be an academic theo-

logian, and doctrinal *deliberation* ought to lead to wise *doing*. Nevertheless, church leaders must devote appropriate time to intentionally reflecting on theology as they practice the ministry that God has placed them in.

After one pastors’ conference presentation on the centrality of the Word for practical ministry, a young church planter lamented how pressure to be practical in

his highly management-oriented ministry context had diminished his zeal for Scripture-driven ministry. This isn’t an uncommon dilemma. How can pastors and church leaders ensure that their practice is rooted in theology *and* that their theology is influencing godly practice? One way is to con-

tinue reading theology beyond what’s necessary for sermon preparation. Pastors could select a “faculty” of a few trusted and helpful theologians (e.g., Calvin, John Murray, R.C. Sproul) whom they will read for a lifetime, in small moments as well as extended seasons, just to be edified, challenged, and sharpened. Another way is for pastors and church leaders to be among God’s people, not just to teach and influence them but to understand their questions, needs, hopes, confusions, and temptations. Those who have been set apart to study doctrine cannot remain apart from church and remain of practical use to the church. The art of practical theology is the outflow of a heart *to study* God’s truth, *to do* it, and *to teach* it to God’s people. ■

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Finding Hope amid Negativity

GABRIEL N.E. FLUHRER

WE LIVE IN A CULTURE desperate for good news of any kind. That's understandable, since what fills most of our news feeds, social media channels, and subscription programming is little more than an endless and mindless stream of human tragedy. Combine that with the fact that the average American spends about three hours per day on his or her phone, and you have the recipe for a culture of negativity. If one has the temerity to proclaim basic scriptural truths such as total depravity, he can expect to be shouted down by a weary populace longing for hope.

I want to persuade you that Christians should be the most hopeful, optimistic people that others ever encounter. This is not because we bury our heads in the sand and plug our ears to avoid anything negative. No, we should be optimists because of what Jesus has done for us and promised us. In this article, we will try to get a basic understanding of why there is so much negativity in our culture. Then we'll look at what Jesus prescribes for hope. We'll conclude with what I pray will be some practical steps to shine the light of gospel hope in a hopeless world.

CYNICISM AND NEGATIVITY

I don't think it's an ideological bridge too far if we connect our culture's cynical bent with its pervasive negativity. The two go hand in hand. One author keenly observed:

The naive optimism of secular liberalism creates cynicism, because optimism in the goodness of humanity collapses.... Instead of preparing us for life, our culture first offers unrealistic hope and then crashes us on the rocks of human depravity.

If, with the majority of Western culture for the past two hundred-plus years, you put your hope in the basic goodness of humanity, you're setting yourself up for a major disappointment. You're setting yourself up to be a cynical, negative person.

That's at least one *ideological* reason that we breathe in the toxic air of negativity all around us. Even if you don't have the time or energy to trace out the philosophical reasons for hopelessness and negativity, you see it in *practical* terms, every day. Just try responding to every conversation you have this week with optimism and see what happens. More often than not, your optimism will be met with dismissive negativity. How should Christians respond?

JESUS' PRESCRIPTION FOR HOPE

Just before Jesus begins His High Priestly Prayer in John 17, He tells His disciples: "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Several details in this verse are worth our consideration, but let's focus on just two.

First, Jesus offers us peace while also warning us about tribulation. Jesus is a realist. This is why He was never a cynic and never overcome with negativity. The very reason that He is in the upper room is that He is going to the cross, and the sinfulness that makes the cross necessary is the source of the negativity all around us. Life in a fallen world is trying, difficult, and grinding. Jesus doesn't minimize these realities.

Second, Jesus goes from realism to optimism at the end of the verse. That shouldn't surprise us, for to be a true optimist, one must first be a true realist. Jesus is both. So He says, "Take heart; I have overcome the world." Yes, we will have tribulation. Still, we must not lose heart. Why? I am fascinated by Jesus' next words: "I have overcome the world." He uses the present perfect tense—speaking of a past event with present consequences—even though the cross, the means by which He will overcome the world, is still future when He says these words.

How could He speak in the present perfect tense? He could do so because, even though the horrors of the cross were yet to come, He knew He would finish the work that His Father had given Him to do. His was not a naive optimism. It was an optimism based on His faith in the promises of the Father to bring Him through the tribulation of Calvary. In short, the promises of the Father sustained our Savior through death and the

grave, giving way to their fulfillment in His resurrection. His was not a naive optimism but a *resurrection* optimism.

PRACTICAL STEPS TO AVOID NEGATIVITY

The kind of resurrection optimism demonstrated by our Lord should mark our lives, too. It is the only kind of optimism that will withstand the daily assaults of negativity.

Believing Jesus' promises is the sole way to avoid becoming a hopeless, cynical pessimist.

How do we start to share in Jesus' resurrection optimism? Here are a few suggestions. First, put down your phone. Often. Stop scrolling

through social media, which feeds on negativity and then feeds it back to us. Second, commit to memorizing biblical verses about hope, such as the one mentioned above. Just one verse a week. Third, pay attention to the first thing that comes to mind when you wake up each morning. I'm guessing, if you're like me, it tends to be something mildly unpleasant or negative. As we all know, how we start the day determines much of its course.

Now, when you wake up tomorrow, to paraphrase Martyn Lloyd-Jones, stop listening to yourself and start talking to yourself. Begin the day by rehearsing the verse (or verses) you've memorized. It will make all the difference for that day—and every day. We as Christians have hope as our birthright because we are united to the One who makes hope possible. There's no good (or biblical) reason to be a pessimist if you're a Christian. And a negative world needs optimistic Christians. **■**

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Spiritual Warfare

BRUCE P. BAUGUS

NO ONE IN HIS RIGHT MIND wants to live in a war zone, as the stories, images, and videos on news reports and social media repeatedly remind us. War devastates cultivated and wild lands alike and reduces villages and cities—even great centers of human achievement—to unlivable wastes. War is violent, brutal, and deadly; its children are chaos, pestilence, and famine.

It is not for nothing that the Christian tradition has long maintained that geopolitical warfare can be morally justified only as a measure of last resort in self-defense—and then only when there is a reasonable chance at success. Our theology does teach us that some causes are worth forfeiting our lives to defend, that warfare is sometimes justified, and that love may even compel us to wage war when it is justified. Yet there is no place in Scripture or sober-minded Reformed theology for romantic fantasies about war.

Therefore, when we come to the many places in Scripture that describe the Christian life in terms of warfare and the ruthlessness that attends warfare, we need to pause and let the reality of this call to wage war sink in. Jesus, who came into the world to be crucified for the salvation of His people, was not naive about the force of the

imagery that He employed. On the night that He was betrayed and condemned to be crucified, He told His disciples: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:12–13). Jesus knew that securing the victory and accomplishing His mission would cost Him His life, and He knew what He was calling His disciples to endure.

Christlike love and obedience in a fallen, sinful world is costly:

“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” (vv. 18–19)

Jesus leans into His point: “‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (v. 20). Then He drives it home: “They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me” (16:2–3).

We must be as careful here as Christ is clear: His struggle, and ours, is not a political or military or economic quest for superiority. Christ’s kingdom is not of this world; otherwise, His disciples would wage war on worldly terms (18:36). The worldly weapons of power, violence, and money are useless in this warfare because our struggle is not

2:14–15; 1 John 3:8). Jesus came to fulfill the promise that God indirectly yet intentionally made to Adam and Eve in Eden when God declared that a son born to a woman would, in effect, crush the serpent’s head under His heel (Gen. 3:15). Jesus came to go to war, but His war was not against Rome but the devil, sin, and death itself.

WHEN WE COME TO THE MANY PLACES

IN SCRIPTURE THAT DESCRIBE THE

CHRISTIAN LIFE IN TERMS OF WARFARE

AND THE RUTHLESSNESS THAT ATTENDS

WARFARE, WE NEED TO PAUSE AND LET

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WAR SINK IN.

“against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places,” as Paul writes in Ephesians 6:12.

The Son of God did not come into the world and assume a truly human nature to seize worldly power and wealth—to live in palaces and recline at tables, to be pampered and served by others. He came to save His people from their sins (Matt. 1:21). He came to disarm our oppressor and destroy the works of our tempter and accuser (Heb.

Satan, who enslaves sinners through the fear of death, knew why the Son of God was in human form and schemed against him from the start. But it is later, as Jesus was beginning His public ministry, that the spiritual nature of this war and the terms on which it must be waged came clearly into view. The Holy Spirit, Mark 1:12 notes, “drove” Jesus “out into the wilderness,” like the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement, where He was tempted by Satan for forty days.

Satan’s goal was clear: Get Jesus to sin. This is how the accuser ensnares every-



one he enslaves. Since he had no claim on Jesus, getting Him to sin was Satan's primary objective. He did not really care how Jesus sinned; he just needed Him to stumble and fall. That unthinkable dark prospect would be Satan's triumph.

Satan's strategy was to challenge Jesus' identity as the Son of God in the face of the suffering that He was already enduring and that would intensify as His hour approached (John 12:23). While his tactics are subtle and shifting, in each of the three temptations reported in Matthew and Luke, Satan attacked Jesus' confidence in His Father's steadfast love, suggesting a twisted application of some promise that the Father had made to the Son to get Jesus to balk before the prospect of the cross by questioning the sufficiency of His Father's care (Matt. 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). It was an ancient ploy that we first encounter in Eden, where the serpent suggested to Eve that God was withholding something desirable and was thus not entirely trustworthy (Gen. 3:1-7).

Jesus will have none of it. But notice how Jesus overcomes. First, Jesus does not respond with His divine power in some extraordinary way but rather resists the devil by faith, holding fast to the ordinary means of God's Word rightly interpreted and applied. In this way, Jesus proves Himself to be the Son of God not by turning a stone into bread or hurling Himself off a pinnacle but by loving His Father—and us—more than His life in this world.

Second, Jesus wages His war entirely on spiritual terms. If His mission and kingdom were political—a kingdom “of this world,” as He puts it—then His disciples would have been fighting in the streets. But His kingdom is from above and must be established on spiritual terms (John 18:36-37). Jesus fights temptation and overcomes the world

through faith in the Word of God, and the victory He wins is obedience and everything that obedience secures. For Jesus, every step of obedience was a step toward the cross, where the ultimate victory was secured as He was crucified in the nadir of His humility.

Adam and Eve, in the abundance of Eden's garden, laid hold of the forbidden fruit in a bid to become like God; Jesus Christ, in the wastes of the Judean wilderness, “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.” Rather, in an act of unthinkable humility and self-denial, He “emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:6-8). This is the mind of Christ and the key to His victory and ours.

In his “struggle against sin,” Adam did not resist “to the point of shedding . . . blood” but followed Eve's lead with apparent ease (Heb. 12:4). He did not “put on the whole armor of God,” and he was not “able to stand against the schemes of the devil” (Eph. 6:11). But Christ does “take up the whole armor of God” and is “able to . . . stand firm . . . , having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness” (vv. 13-14). In the wilderness and throughout His life, we see Jesus “take up the shield of faith, with which [He] can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one” (v. 16). He even took “the helmet of salvation,” trusting His Father's promise to “not abandon [His] soul to Sheol, or let [Him] see corruption,” but to raise Him up on the third day and exalt Him to “the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Ps. 16:10; Heb. 1:3). And He skillfully wielded “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication” (Eph. 6:17-18).

Jesus overcame Satan's temptations in the same way that we can and must overcome temptation: through faith unto obedience—that is, by holding fast to the sufficiency of God for us as proclaimed in every promise and implied in every command of His Word. Jesus did this without fail and

would-be oppressor, under our feet (Eph. 6:15; see Ps. 91:13; Luke 10:19).

The war that we wage is “not . . . against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places”

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was “obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore,” Paul declares,

God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:8-11)

Let us, “as shoes for [our] feet, . . . put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace” as we trample the serpent, our tempter and

(Eph. 6:12). The ultimate victory has already been secured by Christ and is realized in our lives each day as we live by the mind of Christ, doing “nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility counting others more significant than” ourselves (Phil. 2:3). Christ's victory is manifest in the face of our enemies through the freedom and simplicity of our “faith working through love” to obedience (Gal. 5:6).

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