

LIVING IN THE LIGHT

OF THE LORD'S RETURN



James 5:7-12

This Study Paper contains the following :-

- Introduction to the passage
- What these verses mean
- Summary
- A suggestion of what you can preach about from these verses
- Focus Point: The Second Coming
- Over to you

Introduction to the passage

There must have been a lot of trials among the churches to whom James was writing because the theme is never far from his mind – he began with it in the opening verses of the letter (1:1-12). An important part of our Christian witness is that our response to trials, sufferings or injustice is different from the reaction of unbelievers to such things. In our present passage James teaches us to handle these difficult things in the light of the personal return of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the process there are a number of other lessons here arising from our Lord's future return.

What these verses mean

Verse 7

Be patient, then, brothers,

James now turns to the people who have been hurt by unjust treatment on the part of the worldly rich. He is not saying that it is wrong for them to feel the pain. By exercising patience, James means they must not react in a sinful way by a show of temper or violence, or by complaining against God.

until the Lord's coming.

They were tempted to despair because there was nothing they could do about their situation, and there seemed to be no end in sight. But there was

an end in sight, the Lord's coming. We are to live out the Christian life in the light of Jesus Christ. We have his example from his first coming, his cross and resurrection. Also we must look to Jesus Christ, who in God's time will return to the earth. He will bring both judgement on the ungodly and deliverance and justice for his people. The teaching here does not discourage helping ourselves if we are able to do so. Paul twice used the law by pointing to his citizenship of Rome to help him in an unjust situation (Acts 16:37; 22:22-29). But when we cannot help ourselves we are not to despair.

See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains.

James once again uses an agricultural illustration to make his meaning clear. The farmer's patience has two stages. Having done his part in preparing the soil and sowing the seed, he needs the autumn rains to give the seed a good start. Then he must wait patiently for the crop to grow, the spring rain to fill it out, and the reaping. In dire situations Christians have two aids to their patience - the immediate promise of the Lord to give them strength and endurance, and the ultimate promise of his coming when justice will be done and will be seen to be done.

Verse 8

You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.

The Lord's return is described here as his "coming". It could be translated "arrival", because the thought is not so much of the process of his coming, but of his arriving and being present with his people. Since many centuries have passed already and the Lord has not yet returned, we might wonder at James saying that the coming was near. We can explain this in two ways. Firstly, from the perspective of eternity, the period up to the Lord's coming will be short. Second, we are in the latter days, the period between the Lord's resurrection and his coming, and it would seem that James is saying that the time span involved has been measured, it will not last for ever. We should pause to consider the amazing thing that James assumes is possible to these believers. Here are people deprived of their livelihood by greedy, heartless landowners. They have no means of claiming their rights and some of the families may be starving to death. These people are told to be patient and to stand firm. They must hold fast to the Lord and to the gospel, and not fall into unbelief or despair. That Christians down the ages have reacted to injustice like that, and that many still do, is one of the greatest proofs one could have of the validity of our faith and of the Spirit's work in human hearts (Gal. 5:22-23).

Verse 9

Don't grumble against each other, brothers,

Even minor irritations can bring out the worst in us; how much more when we are under extreme testings by our circumstances? It is a common experience that when life is difficult, we tend to become impatient and quarrelsome even with those who are dear to us, or other members in the fellowship of the church. But James will not allow us to make excuses for ourselves. He tells us not to do it; such conduct is out of harmony with our profession as believers.

or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

As Paul tells us, “We must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ” (2 Co. 5:10). One of the things for which we will have to give account to the Lord will be how we have related to our fellow-believers. If our fellowship with them has been positive, this will be pleasing to the Lord. (Consider Malachi 3:16-17 and Hebrews 10:24-25.)

Verse 10

Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

If James’ readers, or we, should want to say that he has set us an impossible standard, James is ready with the answer. There are people who have passed the test. When Stephen made his great speech, for which he was martyred, he said, “Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute?” (Acts 7:52), confirming the words of Jesus (Matt. 23:29-36). An outstanding Old Testament example is Jeremiah. He faithfully taught God’s message to the people, but he was constantly harassed and opposed, until at last he was thrown into a deep well with mud on the bottom of it (Jer. 38:1-13). Later, after he was freed from there, he was bound by chains and treated like a slave (Jer. 40:1). He was certainly patient and did not retaliate, and he stood firm, never wavering from obedience to God and the message he was called on to give. Jeremiah, Elijah and Daniel were among those our Lord had in mind in Matthew 5:11-12.

Verse 11

As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered.

These words reflect Matthew 5:11-12, but it is well to bear in mind that the word “blessed” has a wide breadth of meaning, for example happy, to be envied, spiritually rich, within the orbit of God’s grace. Perhaps here the meaning is that those who have persevered through much testing prove by this very perseverance that they are those who have received God’s grace and continue to do so.

You have heard of Job’s perseverance

The change of word from patience in verse 10 to perseverance in verse 11 is both important and encouraging. James could not honestly have said that

Job was patient because he constantly rebelled against his situation; he was irritable with his friends and complained to God (see for example Job chapters 3 and 16). But he never forsook God despite the terrible things that happened to him (Job 1 and 2). This is encouraging to us because, like Job, we do not always react to trouble as we should, and few of us live up to the high standard James has been setting for us in verses 7-9. But, though we stumble, we do not fall; we go on in the faith; we trust where we cannot see. By God’s grace we persevere. “He who stands firm to the end will be saved” (Matt.10:22).

and have seen what the Lord finally brought about.

Job did not have to wait for the Lord’s return before receiving the fruit of his painful experience. The most important benefit was a new understanding of God, his glory and his dealings with us (see Job 42:1-6). This is the kind of thing Paul had in mind (Rom. 5:3-5) and Peter also (1 Pet.1:6-7).

The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

See Psalm 103:8. There are two good reasons for us to remember this. Firstly, we easily forget it when life is hard and we may be tempted to complain that God has forgotten us or is being unfair to us. God is not only dealing with us with wisdom, he also has a father’s compassion and carefulness (Ps.103:13-14). Secondly, we need to remember this when we fail to be patient in our trials. God is not a slave-master, nor is he reluctant to pardon us, because as James says, he is full of compassion and mercy.

Verse 12

Above all, my brothers, do not swear – not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your “Yes” be “Yes” and your “No”, “No”, or you will be condemned.

The connection of this verse with what has gone before is not very clear. Perhaps, under stress, some people were tempted to make hasty promises or even vows. Difficult or painful situations do tend to open the way to careless language, or even to using the Lord’s name in a flippant manner and thus breaking the third commandment (Ex. 20:7) which leads to condemnation. Whatever the connection, or even if there is no connection, James here follows the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5:33-37. People speak with oaths because they are not sure that others will believe what they are saying. Perhaps they have not always been honest, so other people have good reason to question what they say. Christian people should be noted for their integrity, so that they have no need to swear by anything or anyone. These are days when politicians and business people increasingly say one thing but mean another. Often their words have to be interpreted by commentators. In this, as in many other areas of life, Christians must be different.



Summary

The return of Jesus Christ is a very important doctrine because it is the Christian answer to the widespread pain, injustice and oppression in the world. There is to be punishment for the ungodly, and there will be peace and joy for those who fear God and look to him for mercy. The return of the Lord is also important because it is an incentive for us to live in a way that pleases God in our response to our circumstances, and in our relationship with others. Christians are to be patient and to stand firm, avoiding grumbling against each other. Difficult situations cannot be used as an excuse; all are still answerable and accountable to God. We have examples from the Old Testament to look to, especially Job. He did not get everything right in his situation, but he persevered in the Lord and was brought through his trials during his own lifetime on earth. God is a compassionate and merciful God and ready to forgive us when we recognise our failings in these matters. Above all, Christians are to be honest, so that people can believe what they say and promise without their having to resort to oaths.



A suggestion of what to preach about from these verses

Theme: The importance of the Lord's return

The fact that Jesus Christ will one day return to the earth must be important because all the writers in the New Testament mention it, and some of them do frequently. Without these references the gap would be very large, and the teaching would be hopelessly incomplete.

1. It is important for the world

When Jesus returns, the world will be cleansed by fire from all impurity and imperfection and he will bring in the new heaven and earth (Rom. 8:19-21; 2 Pet.3:10-13).

2. It is important for the ungodly

This is because our Lord will come to judge them (2 Thess.1:7-10; Matt.25:31-32).

3. It is important for Christian believers

All opposition to them will be destroyed (2 Thess.2:8). They will be gathered in one great family (1 Thess.4:18). It will be their final salvation (Heb.9:28; 1 Cor.15:51-52; Phil. 3:20-21).

This is our great hope and comfort (John 14:1-4; 1 Thess.4:10).



Focus Point: The Second Coming

The English phrase "Second Coming" is not in Scripture, though the New Testament teaches 318 times that Christ will return. The doctrine has plenty of references, but it is controversial because the Bible never tells us when Jesus will return. Times and dates are avoided and the appearance of Jesus will be sudden and unexpected.

When Christ comes again it will be a personal and physical coming. Several Greek words are used to describe the return

Parousia presence with an arrival preceding (Phil. 1:16)

Epiphaneia a public appearing (2 Tim. 4:1)

Apocalypsis an unveiling (2 Thess. 1:7)

Hebrews 9:28 contrasts the Lord's first and second coming. The first was to deal with our sin. This involved Jesus becoming a servant, a man. He had to humble himself. He had to suffer death as the punishment for sin. In the second coming he will come to bring us salvation that is already accomplished. Christ will gather his saints, dead and living, to himself (1 Thess. 4:13-18). He will judge unbelievers (2 Thess. 2:8-10). He will come in triumph as King of Kings and Lord of Lords and set up a reign of righteousness (2 Pet. 3:10-13).

This is a comforting doctrine for the Christian believer. This doctrine helps the believer not only to bear the troubles and difficulties of this world (affliction, persecution, illness etc.), but to rejoice in them. The Christian can do this because he or she knows that this world is only temporary in nature and that when Christ returns there will be a new heaven and a new earth.

The principle of Christ's return is a doctrine accepted by Christian believers. The difficulties emerge in the details, especially in a reference in Revelation 20 to the millennium or thousand years. There are three broad views on this.

Post-millennialism this view holds that the second coming of Christ will follow a thousand year period.

Pre-millennialism this view holds that the return of Christ will come before the thousand year period.

A-millennialism this view does not interpret the thousand years of Revelation 20 literally, but states that the millennium describes an undefined period of time. Usually this view holds that the second coming will take place after this period of time.

Each of the three positions has had support from amongst well-known Christians and theologians. The fact that such men could differ on the detailed interpretation of this doctrine underlines how we should avoid getting into argumentative viewpoints. The fundamental teaching has to be of the certainty of Christ's coming and the Christian's readiness for it. The detail is secondary and could take up a lot of unproductive time with inconclusive results. The danger is for churches and denominations to take a dogmatic approach and stipulate which position its members have to adopt. It would be sad to think that a person could be excluded from participating in membership of a local group of believers because he or she holds differing views on a doctrine, the details of which are kept vague by the Scriptures. A veil has been placed by God deliberately, so not even the Son, when he was on earth the first time, knew the detail of his own return.

Source used: A Dictionary of Theological Terms – M. E. Manton (Grace Publications) and Bitesize Theology – Peter Jeffery (Evangelical Press).



Over to you

Until studying this passage, how did you counsel those in your congregation who were passing through the various difficulties of life? Would you now take a different approach?

In the light of this study, how should you preach and teach the return of the Lord Jesus Christ?

Do you hesitate to encourage the poorest people in your church to be contented in the light of Romans 8:18?