



GODLY WISDOM FOR DIFFICULT TIMES – James 5:7-20; Romans 12:9-18

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Today we come to the end of the book that was written by Jesus' brother, James, to the largely Jewish believers scattered across the Roman empire after persecution forced them to flee from Jerusalem. It is a book written by a pastor, which is another word for shepherd, to his flock. As I thought about this in relationship to James, it just so happened that the Grace Groups were looking at Psalm 23 which talks about the Great Shepherd, the one on whom all pastoral ministry is based. We read:

*The LORD is my shepherd; I have all that I need.
He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams.
He renews my strength.
He guides me along right paths, bringing honour to his name.
Even when I walk through the darkest valley, in the shadow of death,
I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me.
Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me. (Psalm 23:1-4 NLT)*

We see echoes of this picture in James' letter as we observe his pastoral relationship with his readers. We see him feeding and encouraging them as he helps them to draw close to God and love Him with all their hearts. He guides and corrects them as he talks about how their faith must show itself in their actions, how their heart's desire will affect the wisdom they follow and the way they act. And he isn't shy about pulling them into line when he sees them doing the wrong thing! And then he seeks to protect them from Satan's deceptions and attacks and strengthens them to face the suffering they will experience as followers of the Suffering One.

As James draws his epistle to a conclusion, we see him really coming alongside his readers to encourage and bring comfort in the difficult situations they are facing. He knows that trouble and suffering and sin are inescapable in this world. But he also knows that God has promised to give us everything we need to live in the midst of these things. When we face difficult times, we can stand firm and stand together and those difficult times need not destroy us. Throughout these final verses, we will see echoes of things James has said before as he pulls everything together and wraps up what he wants them to know.

Stand firm in patience

The first section is about standing firm in our faith in the face of suffering. The key word here is PATIENCE. We can stand firm with patience "*for the coming of the Lord is near*" (5:8). The word "coming" is from a Greek word which is used to reflect the Jewish hope of the coming of God the

King – both to judge the wicked and to deliver the righteous. As we patiently wait for this final coming, even when it means enduring suffering, we can know that we are not abandoned. We can trust God's justice – He will not allow sins to go unpunished – and we can trust God's love – He will always rescue His people because he cares for them.

This idea is explained further with three pictures his readers would have been familiar with from the Old Testament. First, we are to have patience like the farmer who waits for the early and late rains in expectation of a good crop to come. This is a picture which is often used to picture God's faithfulness. Just as seeds are growing unseen under the soil and then take a while to ripen, nurtured by the rain, so God is at work in our situation even if we can't see what He is doing. Secondly, we have the picture of the prophets who proclaimed God's message and remained faithful to Him even though they were persecuted. They knew God and they knew what He had told them to say, and this gave them courage in the face of opposition. The final picture is that of Job. Even though he struggled to understand what God was doing, he never abandoned his faith in God and his hope that God would do the right thing. He discovered that, even though he went through difficult times, God's ultimate purpose for him was good. In fact, James says God cared for him with tenderness and mercy. The farmer, the prophets and Job are all pictures of how we should face difficult times of waiting and uncertainty. All show us the faithfulness and justice and love of God that we will see as we trust Him.

But you will notice that there are a couple of statements which James makes in these verses which don't seem to fit in with this discussion. As we've seen before, as James is hoping from one steppingstone to the next, he sometimes seems to take a hop sideways and looks at something related to, but not exactly connected to his main discussion. As I thought about this and tried to understand what James might be thinking here, I wondered if, as he is talking about the justice and love of God, his mind jumps to thinking about our justice and love and how we need to maintain these even when we are facing difficulties.

For instance, as we can trust God's love, so we need to maintain our love for others. James says:

Don't grumble about each other, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. For look—the Judge is standing at the door! (5:9)

When we are under stress, it is very easy to take our frustrations out on each other, isn't it? However, in love, we are to be patient with each other and not grumble against each other. James places high priority on this as He reminds them that God will judge us if we give into this tendency.

And, as we can trust God's integrity and justice, so we also have a responsibility to maintain our own integrity. James says:

But most of all, my brothers and sisters, never take an oath, by heaven or earth or anything else. Just say a simple yes or no, so that you will not sin and be condemned. (5:12)

He is saying that people should so trust our word that we don't need to take an oath when we promise to do something. Our word should be enough because we are known for speaking and acting justly and honestly. Now, in today's world, there are times when we need to take an oath, like in court, because people don't know us and can't know if we will be honest. But in everyday life, with those who know us, people should be able to trust us when we say "Yes" or "No" about something. If they can't, then again, we will be judged accordingly.

Stand together for restoration

I find this next section one of the most encouraging of the whole book – and the one which leaves me with the most questions! James ends his book with a call for his readers to stand together as they face the ups and downs of this life and here, I believe the key word is RESTORATION. When we stand together, God's presence is with us in a unique way to bring healing to us as whole people – body, mind and spirit. There is much discussion in the commentaries as to whether Paul is talking about physical healing or spiritual healing in these verses, but I believe we are wrong to make such

distinctions. We are integrated people, and we are increasingly discovering just how difficulties in one area affect us in other areas. We now know that experiencing trauma can physically re-wire our brains so that a mental issue becomes a physical one, and this in turn can deeply affect how we think about God, which means it is also a spiritual issue. Physical sickness can rob our brains of the right chemicals so that we experience depression and confusion and struggle to trust God and sometimes turn to sinful behaviour to make us feel better. Habitual sin can destroy our physical and mental health. I believe that all of us need God's healing in all these areas of our lives at different times and in different ways. That is why, in this section which talks about healing, James also talks about forgiveness of sin. This is not because every physical or mental illness is caused by sin, but because so often the difficulties we face are complex bundles of physical, mental and spiritual issues which only God can truly heal. That doesn't mean that we don't make use of medical and psychological professionals, but rather that they are not all we need. The principle which I believe James is giving us is that when we gather together as the Body of Christ, God's healing presence is with us and He desires to heal us of all the wounds which living in this sinful, broken world can give us. His goal is to heal us and deepen our fellowship with Him so that we can live as His people in wholeness and grace.

But what does this mean in practice? I am sure that as you read these verses you come away with as many questions as I do as to how they should guide our practice. Every time we are sick, should we call the elders and ask them to anoint us with oil and pray for us? What does it mean to anoint with oil and what does that accomplish that just prayer doesn't? Do Elders have more "power" than other Christians and is that why they are to be called? What does it mean that we are to confess our sins to one another? How do these things relate to the Catholic practices of the Last Rites, Confession and Absolution?

Guess what ... unless you want to be here for a couple more hours, I can't answer all those questions today! But I am happy to talk with you about them and if people express an interest, we can go back and look at them in more detail later. These are not unimportant questions. I will just say that I do believe that God does miraculously heal physical sickness today – sometimes immediately and sometimes over time. I have seen it in my own family. I have also experienced times when the physical issues are not healed, but the mental and spiritual distress caused by the physical sickness is healed and that has been more important. I have no doubts about God's ability and desire to heal today. More than a specific routine, the important thing to take away from James' discussion is God's desire to heal us as we face the inevitable wounds inflicted by a sinful world.

And I also want us to see that God gives us a role for us as the church to bring healing to each other. James gives us a list of things and when we combine that with what we learn from what Paul says in Romans about how we should live together, we end up with a helpful list of things that we can be doing to be channels of God's healing presence in each other's lives.

- **Love and honour each other** – James has repeatedly talked about the importance of valuing everyone equally and loving our neighbour as ourselves. And Paul urges us to live in peace and harmony which takes love and not grumbling!
- **Walk together through life's ups and downs** – Paul talks of weeping with those who are weep and rejoicing with those who are rejoicing. James adds praying for each other and confessing our sins to one another as channels of God's healing.
- **Help those in need** – James urges us to pray for the sick and Paul talks of practicing hospitality. Both of these require us to come alongside those who are hurting and give of ourselves for their benefit.
- **Extend God's forgiveness** – James urges us to actively go and seek to bring back those who sin and wander from God. Only God can forgive sin, but we can bring each other into His forgiveness.

These paint a wonderful picture of God's people. Just being a part of such a community would bring healing and hope. It is a community in which we all come together at the foot of the cross and discover God's healing of our body, mind and spirit. And it is there where we are given God's love for each other and the strength to endure the difficult times.

The coming of the Judge

Throughout his book, James has had an underlying theme of the coming judgement of God. Have we kept the royal law of love for our neighbour? Have we been merciful and just in our treatment of others? Have we spoken the truth? Are we guilty of judging others harshly? Have we grumbled against our brothers and sisters in Christ? He has also reminded us that if we break one of God's laws, we are guilty of all of them. In light of all of this, who among us could stand before God and not be condemned? On the one hand, this judgement encourages us because we know that one day, people who have hurt us and caused us pain will have to answer to God for their sin. On the other hand, it also brings home to us the reality of our own sin – those times when we have not acted in love, not been merciful, when we have spoken ill of others, judged them and grumbled against them. Even as God's own people, inhabited by His Spirit, we fall so very short of His glory. The only way we can take another step under the weight of the realisation of our own sin is because He has promised that *"if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness."* (1 John 1:9) God's forgiveness is our hope and our joy.

But there is more! When we stand before God the Judge on that day, sinless and free of condemnation, the only thing which will be left for God to judge will be the good deeds we have done by the power of God's Spirit within us. Right at the end of the Bible, Jesus says, *"Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done."* (Revelation 22:12) As well as condemning sinful deeds, the Judge will reward good deeds which have been done by His people who have hearts wholly devoted to Him and who have followed godly wisdom. After all the sin has been washed away, our good deeds will shine forth to the glory of God who has enabled us to reflect Him, however imperfectly, through our actions.

Over the last few days, we've heard many remembrances of encounters with Queen Elizabeth. One was from a young man who was asked to carry the Commonwealth Mace for a service at St Andrews Cathedral when she visited Australia in 2006 for the Melbourne Commonwealth Games. (The Day I met the Queen, James Galea, au.thegospelcoalition.org) After the service, he was invited to a private reception where he was presented to the Queen. He was absolutely astonished when she thanked him for his service to her as he took time out of his busy life to carry the heavy mace. He wanted to honour her by his service, and she wanted to honour him for his service to her. He goes on to say that this incident helped him to understand more fully what it will be like one day to stand before the King of Kings and hear the words *"Well done good and faithful servant! Come and share your master's happiness!"* (Matthew 25:23 NIV) God sees our efforts, God knows what they cost us, and God will honour our good deeds because they are important to Him, and make a real difference in His kingdom.

Conclusion

As we leave the book of James, I pray that it has helped us look at our lives and how it should be transformed as we wholeheartedly love God and follow Him. I pray that we have all gained a bit more of God's heavenly wisdom about what we say and what we do as His servants. I pray that our lives together will be more infused with His love and mercy as we seek to be a community of His people in this world.