

Storm Warning

- James 5:1-6
- It is amazing how accurate storm warnings can be these days. When we were three or four days out from that snow-pocalypse in January, the weather forecasters were warning of 6-8 inches of snow. The roads were covered with salt, the stores were out of milk and bread, and sleds were out of stock at Wal-Mart. And they were right. The forecasters. They got it right, and they often do. Often. Not always. Sometimes they miss it badly, and schools have canceled classes for the blizzard that never happened. But here's one thing we know for sure. God's forecasts are 100% accurate. He never misses. He tells us what is going to happen, and we can take it to the bank. Or better, we can take it to heart. In today's text, God issues a weather alert that is shocking for this letter from James. So much so that it seems out of place. He tells the rich that a bad storm of great misery is coming. A storm of biblical proportions. He tells them that the cry of those who have been exploited in order to indulge their every desire has reached His ears. And that those who have gained wealth through fraud and hoarding and even murder are simply fattening their hearts for the day of slaughter.
- Why is this section here? There are many theories, but I think most agree that James is not writing this to the believers directly. In fact, in nearly every other section of his letter, except for this one and the one before it, that Shawn preached from last week, James calls them brothers. Verse 11 of chapter 4, "Do not speak evil against one another, brothers." Not here. He starts this section, and the previous one, with "Come now." He is writing to the unbelieving rich who live up on the hill and own the farms and employ day laborers and who pay slave wages or none at all, and since they own the courts or control the judges, there is no justice. The workers groan but there is no redress for their grievances. I have told you before that some think James is a collection of sermons, or parts of sermons. I like the imagery of James preaching this message to the congregation, and when he gets to this section he walks over to the window that faces the hill where the rich farmers live. He throws open the window and yells out, "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you." And he ends with, "You have condemned and murdered the righteous person, and he does not resist you." He puts the window down, walks to the pulpit, and says with gentleness, "Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord."
- Why is this section here? Well, because even if James is not writing or speaking this to the believers, he is speaking it to them in an indirect way. He is telling them three important biblical truths in this passage that we must hold onto ourselves. First, that we must not value riches more than we should. Second, that we are not to envy the rich. And third, that we are not to do whatever it takes to become rich. **Repeat.** Paul said "But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction." (1 Tim. 6:9) Therefore we should ask God for a heart of contentment, get off the hamster wheel that makes us chase after more of this or that, and to learn to say with Paul, "But if we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content." Just imagine going through your house and removing everything that wasn't food or clothing. Would you be content? Now, God is not asking you to go through your house and do that. He is asking you and me to be content whether we have much or whether we have little. It's not a question of how much stuff we own; it's a question of how much our stuff owns us.
- Finally, before we get into the text and unpack it a little, let's be reminded that God is not against rich people. It would be easy to read this section and go off on a crusade against everybody in the world who is rich. You know how we decide who is rich, right? Anybody who has more money and stuff than we do. But the Bible includes very wealthy people, like Job and Abraham and Joseph and Nicodemus and Zaccheus who were followers of God and greatly used by Him. The issue is not our possessions, but our hearts. The storm warning is for the rich who "boast in their

arrogance,” as James said in 4:16. The storm warning is for those who exploit others in their pursuit of wealth and pleasure. And but for the grace of God, so go I. And you. We are to take this truth to heart, and batten down the hatches of our desires so that we don't end up right where these are whom James is warning.

- So with that introduction, let's look at this text under two headings, Charges and Consequences. First James says to those who live for themselves, this is what you are doing. Second, this is what you have coming to you.
- **Charges**
- There are four sins listed here, four charges leveled against the rich. **First, they were guilty of hoarding.** Verse 2b, “You have laid up treasure in the last days.” They were heaping up treasures for themselves as a barricade against hard times that could come later. They have storehouses of grain, which James says are rotting in the barns. They have closets full of clothes that are being eaten by moths. Even their gold and silver is corroded! We know that gold and silver don't corrode, but the point James is making is that even the place where we think our hoarded wealth will be the safest doesn't stand a chance against the storm that is coming. It will all be taken away. It will all be consumed. It will all be burned. The issue here is not whether you have wealth but how you use it. What happens when you take money that you have been storing away for yourself, and you give it to someone who needs them now? You make an incredible transfer! You make a withdrawal from the worldly bank and make a deposit into the bank of heaven. Jesus said you are storing up treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not corrupt and where thieves cannot break in and steal. And listen! The issue here is not poor workers who need their wages; it is that they are owed their wages. It's their money that we are stealing from them if we don't pay what we owe. In the same way, we aren't called by God to give a tithe of our income to the church because the church needs it. Or because God needs it. But because it's God's, and we are robbing God when we lay up for ourselves what belongs to Him.
- **Second, they were guilty of fraud.** Verse 4, they have kept back wages. The people who worked in their fields or factories or shops or businesses helped them prosper with the understanding that they would share in that prosperity through earned wages. But then those wages were not paid. I remember some lean months in the early years of the church, when the elders would come to me with the news that my salary check would be late. One week, maybe two. Some of you have been there as well. But these workers were not being paid at all! They were struggling for daily food and drink; they were starving and their children were weak and sick from hunger. And there was nothing they could do about it except cry out to God. Kent Hughes writes, “All who employ others must ask themselves if there are any voices crying out to God because of them.” The Lord of Hosts, Lord Sabaoth, hears those cries, and payday is coming. James uses the same name for God that David did in saying to Goliath, “You come to me with a sword, a spear and a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of Hosts!” We know who won that battle. He still does.
- **Third, they were guilty of self-indulgence.** Verse 5, they lived in luxury and they lived to satisfy their whims and their desires. They were overfed and unconcerned. They had the wealth that meant they never had to say no to themselves. Ever. And they thought in their arrogance that meant that no one else could say no to them as well. But the storm is coming, and they cannot stop it and they cannot run or hide.
- **Fourth, they were guilty of murder.** Verse 6, you have condemned and murdered the righteous person. Some believe James is speaking of judicial murder. They used their wealth and power and privilege to control society and keep poor people oppressed and subservient. But there is another view taken by others that is worth considering. Remember James was writing in a culture and to a people where there was no middle class, like there is today in the west. There was the very rich and the very poor, and not much else. It is still the same today in many countries. I have told you before about being in Kenya years ago and hearing that if someone steals even a mango from a vendor in the open-air marketplace teeming with people, he can be put to death on the spot. Held

in the street, a tire placed over him so he cannot move his legs, and then the tire is set on fire. When I asked why a man would be killed for stealing a mango, the Kenyan explained that the man selling the mango has to make money to feed his family. If he doesn't, his children may die. In other words, those who exploit the poor may be guilty of murdering the innocent.

- Billy Sunday used to say, "The fellow that has no money is poor. The fellow who has nothing but money is poorer still."
- **Consequences**
- This is what you have coming to you, God says through James to these rich unbelievers. **First, misery is coming.** We only need to think about the story that Jesus told about the rich man and Lazarus the beggar. Lazarus lay at the rich man's gate and wished he could have even the crumbs from the rich man's table, but the rich man was overfed and unconcerned. Lazarus died and was carried to the angels, Jesus said. The rich man died and found himself in great torment. Misery does not begin to express what he suffered, and he begged for even a drop of water to be placed on his tongue. Who turned out to be the rich man in this story? The righteous beggar whose riches were in heaven, not on the earth.
- **Second, there is great loss.** Verses 2-3, as we have seen, express what Solomon said in Proverbs 23:4-5, "Do not toil to acquire wealth; be discerning enough to desist. When your eyes light on it, it is gone, for suddenly it sprouts wings, flying like an eagle toward heaven." Job said, "The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." Paul said we would take out of the world exactly what we brought into it: nothing. (1 Tim. 6:7) But not only that. James says that the corrosion of the rich man's wealth "will be evidence against (him) and will eat (his) flesh like fire." Wealth that is used to help others and to honor God brings great blessing. Any other accumulation of money and stuff brings its own curse with it.
- **Third, there is a day of reckoning,** or slaughter, as James calls it. There are many reasons we should become givers and not takers. There is great joy in giving. It is more blessed to give than to receive, the Bible says. Also, thankful givers expand their hearts to receive even more gratitude. The happiest people are the most thankful. And, when someone asks you why you give so much money away, to the church, to the ministries you believe in, to good causes, tell them this: *Because there is a test at the end.* And all who live for God and for others will love the last day. They have already passed the test and they will be welcomed in to the greatest celebration of God's goodness and giving that we cannot even imagine!
- James closes the window and turns to us and says, "Be patient, therefore, brother, until the coming of the Lord."
- Prayer
- **Nicene Creed**
- **Song by Rudy**