

James 5:1-6

July 19, 2020

Merry Christmas everyone!

Now that's not the kind of greeting you hear this time of year! Christmas is the last thing on our minds. But it wasn't for a fictional character created by Charles Dickens named Ebenezer Scrooge.

We all remember the story of Scrooge, don't we? That miserly old geezer who was so mean and nasty that he hoarded all his money, overworked his employees and treated everyone with contempt!

And then one Christmas Eve his fitful sleep was interrupted by a series of ghostly visitors... the last of which was by far the scariest! For the so called "Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come" gave Scrooge a glimpse of his future ...and it was not a pretty sight! He saw the end and the utter demise of his fortune and legacy. He saw people selling off his possessions and deriding his memory. Perhaps worst of all he saw his own tomb.

This vision of utter ruin, not only scared Mr. Scrooge, it motivated him to change his ways. The very next morning, he awakened bent on being a better person

shouting Merry Christmas to all, and being unusually generous, in hopes of avoiding that bitter end.

And sometimes God takes a similar tack with us. He shows us a view of the end...a vision of what a sinful life leads to.

He gives us a glimpse of the demise of the wicked on that Final Day and it's not a pretty picture!

Keep this in mind as we read from our text in James this morning. Let's take a look at what amounts to a frightful picture of the judgement of God.

James 5:1-6

¹Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. ²Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. ³Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. ⁴Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. ⁵You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. ⁶You have condemned; you have murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.

“Weep and howl for the miseries coming upon you.” To whom is he speaking? And what have they done to deserve such a sinister pronouncement? The text calls them “rich”. But they are not just any kind of “rich”. They are an affluent group of people who have accumulated wealth for themselves and let it go to waste. In short, they have accumulated lots of stuff, hoarded it and **not** put it to good use.

How do we know that? Because of the way the text describes their possessions.

“**Your garments are moth-eaten**”. Garments do not get eaten by moths while you wear them. Moths only have opportunity to munch on clothes while they are hanging unused in a dark forlorn closet.

“**Your gold and silver have corroded**”. Wealth that is invested and put to good use, does not have opportunity to corrode. It’s too busy exchanging hands and being used to tarnish.

No...the people whom James is talking about are a special kind of “rich”. They are a “rich” who are accumulating wealth for themselves and themselves alone. They are like that man in Jesus’ parable who received the “one talent” (which is an amount of money equivalent to about one million dollars) and buried it instead of investing it. And what was the

outcome for that particular guy (the guy who hoarded his million)? Matthew 25 tells us.

But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! (Mt 25:26)

You ought to have invested my money with the bankers and at my coming I would have received my money with interest! (Mt 25:28)

Cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness, in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Mt 25:30)

There it is. "Weeping and gnashing of teeth". It sounds a lot like verse 1 of our text doesn't it? "Weep and howl, you rich!"

And the end of verse 3 gives us a clue as to the occasion of this pronouncement. This "corrosion" of your gold and silver "**will be evidence against you.**" "Evidence" is the language of the courtroom, the language of trial. That means James 5:1-6 is actually a pronouncement of judgment. These rich ones are being judged for their misuse of possessions... possessions that were on loan to them from God.

And not only are they being judged; they are being sentenced. Notice what it says. Your moth-eaten

clothes and your corroded money “will eat your flesh like fire.” They are being sentenced to a fiery, flesh eating existence.

Doesn't that phrase sound familiar? Didn't Jesus use similar language when he described hell as a place “where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched”? (Mark 9:48). According to Jesus, hell is a place where flesh eating worms do not die and flesh burning fire does not cease.

These rich people are being judged. They are being sentenced to a hellish existence, with no way out. Unlike everywhere else in James, this text makes no appeal for its subjects to repent.

No...their deal has been sealed.

Instead, James provides a picture of the Judgment Day. And he resorts to rather unpleasant language.

On the surface, the whole thing sounds discouraging. Who wants to hear of people weeping and howling as a judge sentences them to a terrifying punishment? Why do this? What is the point of giving the readers of this letter a peek inside God's courtroom only to see him doling out pain and punishment?

Proposition:

It's because **pondering the judgement of God is a blessing in disguise, for it points us to the way of righteousness!**

Let me explain.

Remember Mr. Scrooge from our opening illustration? What turned him from his path of doom?

It was the gift of a vision...a vision of his very demise. When he finally saw the outcome of his selfish ways, terror gripped him, and he resolved to change.

And so it is with our text. James shows us a picture of God's judgement to frighten us, to keep us from drifting off into sin ...and from suffering a similar fate. In essence, James is reciting a judgement oracle to warn us and to cultivate within us:

1) The Fear of the Lord

The fear of the Lord is not often talked about in Christian circles. We prefer cozier concepts like the

- love of the Lord
- or the goodness of the Lord
- or the kindness of the Lord

Fear denotes trembling and terror. How can a good and loving God be someone to fear?

The letter of James actually helps us understand.
Remember this phrase from a couple weeks ago?

"There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy." (James 4:12)

You see, our loving gracious heavenly Father is also a judge who will not let the guilty go unpunished! If necessary, He will even destroy!

For as Hebrews declares

"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." (Hebrews 10:31)

And looking at the destruction of unrepentant sinners like these rich people in James, can help us walk out our own salvation with fear and trembling!

Do you see it now? Do you see how pondering the judgement of God can be a blessing in disguise?

The Fear of the Lord

->points us to the way of righteousness

It blesses us because it steers us clear of sin and points us back to the way of obedience!

Rather than reaping the consequences of disobedience, namely weeping and howling for

eternity, we have opportunity submit to God now, draw near to him now and experience the freedom of his forgiveness and the power of his exaltation at present.

But there is another blessing in disguise that our text in James affords us. Let's discover it together as we take a closer look at verse 4.

Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.

You see, this judgement oracle has more to say! Apparently, the rich of verses 1-3, have more crimes for which to be punished. Not only have they failed to love God (by misusing the money he gave them), they've failed to love their neighbors too... neighbors who actually worked for them! They are guilty of withholding their wages and defrauding laborers who routinely mowed their fields.

And 'mow' is a misleading word here. These laborers did not have lawn mowers like we do today. They had to cut the fields with sickles and gather the clippings by hand. This was back-breaking work from sunup to sundown. And after all the blood, sweat and tears, to

be defrauded of your wage! What a crime! What injustice! From all appearances these poor laborers were at the mercy of their wealthy masters. They had no one to come to their rescue... no one to right this terrible wrong!

But wait...there actually is someone who hears! The end of verse 4 says their cries have reached the ears of the Lord of Hosts! The Lord hears! This same Lord who is the Lawgiver and Judge, stands ready with a host of warriors at his command to right this wrong! Justice will be served! They have

2) The Vengeance of the Lord on their side.

Here is the second blessing in disguise. The defrauded laborers have an advocate! God will avenge! God will bring justice. God will fight for them!

And the oppressive landowners have no idea what is coming. Verse 5 likens them to livestock being fattened for slaughter. As they proceed down their chosen path of self-indulgent luxury and oppression, they are totally oblivious of the end game. They have no idea that they are headed for the slaughterhouse of the Lord. They have no idea that God will make them pay with their very lives, for eternity!

So, how is the vengeance of God, a blessing for us? Well, consider this. Whenever we are wronged, whenever we experience injustice, we have an avenger! We have one who will execute justice for us at the proper time. And he will do it justly! He will do it righteously.

In fact, He is the only one who can execute justice, rightly and justly.

We humans make for horrible avengers. When we experience injustice, we get angry. We fight back. We wage war and we make things worse. We just pour gas on the inferno of injustice.

Just look at our culture today. Talk of injustice is the rage. And just what do those decrying injustice do? They perpetrate further injustice.

This is precisely why Paul tells us in Romans 12:19 to never avenge ourselves, but to leave room for the vengeance of God. Because we are not in a position to execute justice rightly. It is not our place.

But there is one who can and does execute justice the right way... the Lord of Hosts! And we have his ear!

So how should we respond in light of this good news? In short... with patience.

The Vengeance of the Lord

-> encourages us to be patient

Next week's text begins with the words "Be patient, therefore brothers, until the coming of the Lord." And then proceeds to encourage us to patiently wait for our avenger. But I'll leave that exposition for next week.

But we do have a clue in our text this morning. Notice verse 6. It speaks of a righteous person who endured an even greater injustice ...that of being condemned and murdered. But it isn't the crime of murder that makes this verse remarkable. Rather, it is the simple response of the man being murdered. James states it this way: "He did not resist you."

As an example of how to respond while being murdered, James points to a man who did not resist his assailants. He did not retaliate. Rather he waited for the Avenger, the Lord Almighty.

What remarkable patience! What remarkable trust in the Lord!

Who was this righteous person who did not resist his own condemnation and murder? We can only speculate. But whoever he was he was only following

the example of another even more Righteous One who preceded him...the Lord Jesus Christ.

You see the death of Jesus Christ was in many respects, a murder.

- He was betrayed by a close friend.
- He was falsely accused during an illegally assembled late night trial that could produce no evidence against him.
- And he was executed by a cowardly governor who could not come up with a single reason to put him to death but yielded to the pressure of an angry mob.

Christ's death was an utter travesty of justice!

But even so, Jesus did not resist! It is not as if he couldn't have resisted. For shortly before his murder, he had this to say:

"Do you not think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?" (Matthew 26:53-54)

You see, Jesus had the Avenger at his disposal but rather than appeal for him to stop the injustice. He let it proceed.

For:

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
Yet he opened not his mouth;
Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
And like a sheep that is before its shearers silent,
So he opened not his mouth. (Isaiah 53:7)

Yet

Out of the anguish of his soul
he shall see and be satisfied;
By his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant
Make many to be accounted righteous,
And he shall bear their iniquities.
(Isaiah 53:11)

You see, this particular judgment of God is our biggest blessing in disguise! The outright murder of the Righteous One, Jesus Christ, and his decision not to resist being murdered, is the way of righteousness.

For the Avenger in Chief, his Father, vindicated his Son Jesus three days after his murder. He raised him from the dead and enthroned him in the Heavens, where he remains seated to this day extending forgiveness and righteousness to everyone who calls upon him and to everyone who wholeheartedly trusts in him.

And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved! (Acts 4:12)

...making him the ultimate blessing in disguise!

PRAY