

Rich & Poor

James 1:9-11

James doesn't waste any time telling the brethren what things they will need to count all joy. Even though we are the most prosperous nation in history, we worry about money a lot. In the early church believers suffered great loss and did not just endure it but learned to boast in their suffering. Poverty was a promotion.

Summary of the Text

James says the lowly or poor brother should glory in his exaltation (v. 9). His lowliness is an honor and so that is how he should reckon it. But the rich should make equal note of his humiliation because like a flower, he will soon pass away (v. 10). The burning sun rises and turns the grass brown, shrivels the flower, and its beauty is gone. The rich man chasing all the shiny is like them, fading away and becoming worthless before you know it (v. 11).

The Loss of Things

The brethren scattered after the persecution of Stephen were driven from their homes and livelihoods (Acts 8:1, 11:19). Even before that, believers in Jerusalem sold possessions to help one another with their needs (Acts 2:44-45). Jesus also warned that the temple would be destroyed within one generation (Matt. 24; Mk. 13; Lk. 17), so there was a ton of displacement, relocation, and hardship in the first-century church. Not only did believing Jesus as the messiah not solve all your problems, it created a bunch of new ones. Imagine you spoke up in a discussion about Jesus in your local synagogue, voicing your conviction that He was innocent and should not have been crucified. The next day you lose your job. Now you're out of work, shunned by your community, and possibly by your family. Your friend who also heard James preach who Jesus agrees with you, but he doesn't say anything because his parents have been griping about the Nazarene for over a year and would disown him if he were to become a disciple—these people aren't even called Christians yet. It's a club not an established religion. He has a pregnant wife and just began apprenticing in his father's textile business. How would you feel about your friend? What if you were in his shoes? The disciples left all things to follow Jesus, but they didn't think the conflicts that happened during His ministry would continue after the resurrection (Acts 1:6). But they would and Jesus meant it when He said that He came to bring a sword, to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, that whoever loves son or daughter more than Him and who won't take up their cross is not worthy of Him. The good news is that though he who finds his life will lose it, he who loses his life for Christ's sake will find it (Matt. 10:34-38). These are not thought experiments but things that would shortly take place in lives of the disciples and the entire church.

Lowly Exaltation

The word "lowly" (*tapeinos*) means poor and refers to a lack of material wealth. Because we are material beings we need food, clothing, and shelter to live. Poverty threatens these needs, or at least makes us feel threatened, and therefore feels like death, like we are headed down to the grave. Apart from grace this desperation produces sin and conflict, especially when the circumstances are caused or perceived to be caused by an identifiable party. Envious people think their lack of whatever is caused by someone else's abundance. Much modern anti-Semitism stems from this as people envy the Jews whether in Israel or Hollywood. So if you are poor, the temptation to fear, worry, and despair is strong. Poverty itself is not a virtue. The sluggard needs to study ants and a son who sleeps during harvest causes shame (Prov. 6:6, 10:5). James doesn't explain this because the twelve tribes scattered abroad are suffering faithfully. They have lost resources and relationships and are tempted to feel discouraged and condemned by deprivation and accusation. James exhorts them to boast in their exaltation. G.K. Chesterton said "*A paradox is truth, standing*

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on its head, shouting for attention.” The truth is so often like this which can be explain by God’s own character. He is God Almighty, high and exalted, and yet was born to a poor, engaged, teenage virgin. He is worshiped by countless angels and archangels who form heavenly choirs, and they appeared to shepherds who were in the fields at night to announce Jesus’ birth. God likes to take poor, unimportant, unrecognized, people and bless them beyond all reckoning. How is it that being materially poor in faithfulness an exaltation? James already explained what trials in general do: produce patience and then maturity, making us complete in Christ (1:3-4). To suffer loss of goods for Christ is to follow Him. The poor in Spirit receive the kingdom of heaven, and the meek before God will inherit the earth (Matt. 5:3). When Jesus left His trade to preach the gospel and rely on the Father to provide for Him, what was His trajectory? Would He be alright given the loss of regular income? Or when the apostles left their occupations and businesses, was it an honor or a disgrace? So when Christians suffer faithfully and give sacrificially, it’s an honor.

The Duty of Boasting

Rather than despair in poverty, James says to boast. If you’ve been exalted, you celebrate, and so you should when hard things come through faithfulness to God. Gratitude, laughter, fellowship, faith, hope, and love—all the things that matter—are free. Nothing can take these away except for sin. So the believer who doesn’t have things that he could have if only he would serve mammon and make his decisions based on a profit motive should be positively delighted by it. The temptation to despise or envy the rich is powerful. Just as it’s easy for poor people to despise the rich, so it is for struggling churches to envy well-established ones. They’re not faithful, so why do they have all this stuff? Or they are faithful, just like we are, so why don’t we have what they do? Are we cursed? No, but people truly are wracked by discontent, covetousness, and envy. Jesus said to the church in Smyrna, *“I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan”* (Rev. 2:9). They were rich in Christ and He wanted them to know it. Boasting in hard circumstances gives glory to God in way that cannot be mistaken for anything else. Paul says *“we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope”* (Rom. 5:3-4). You can lose your job, friends, a relationship, your home and boasting says *“God was with me through all of it, comforting, teaching, leading, correcting, forgiving and providing. What pure grace to be loved by Him.”* This is how Murphy’s Law becomes truly hilarious. The unrighteous rich know nothing of it. They find security in money and reputation, and therefore lose both (v. 11). God doesn’t mind His people having money, but money having His people. He wants us to be faithful in little so that we will be faithful in much.