

# Wasted Wealth

James 5:1-6

Up to this point in his epistle, James has been speaking directly to Jewish Christians scattered abroad. Now he addresses those who are persecuting them. This might seem odd since this isn't written to the persecutors, but just as the Lord of Sabaoth hears the cry of the oppressed, so this message will have its effect on those who rob the poor and reject God's kingdom.

## Summary of the Text

Similar to his imperative to the presumptuous to "Come now" (4:13), James calls the persecuting rich to weep and howl for the misery that has come upon them (v. 1). Their wealth and luxurious clothes are moth-eaten, their gold and silver corroded, and the rust will be a witness against them and eat their flesh like fire (vv. 2-3a). They have heaped up wealth in the last days (v. 3b). The wages of their employees who harvested their fields, fraudulently withheld, cry out into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth, the God of Armies (v. 4). They've lived large and extravagantly on the earth, fattening their hearts as for the day of slaughter (v. 5). They've murdered the righteous and he doesn't resist (v. 6).

## Dirty Money

There was a class of rich people living in and around Jerusalem who became wealthy by running schemes and corrupt businesses. Jerry Bower in *The Makers Versus the Takers* explains how the rich young ruler was likely a member of the Sanhedrin, and when Jesus quotes a bunch of the Ten Commandments in His answer to what one needs do to inherit eternal life, He adds "Do not defraud" (Mk. 10:19). The word "defraud" is the same one used by James in verse 4. The rich young ruler was not just wealthy, but his money was dirty and he would not leave it to follow Jesus, so he went away sad (Mk. 10:22). Wealth is not a sin, but wealth gained by unjust means is. The chief tax collector Zacchaeus joyfully received Jesus and told Him, "'Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold.' And Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost'" (Lk. 19:8-10). Repentance and faith require us to walk away from wickedness, and this includes sharp business practices, withholding payment when its due, and covetousness. The Lord's denunciation of lawyers, scribes, and Pharisees occurs in Jerusalem and the surrounding area of Judea, the same region where Jewish Christians were persecuted and forced to flee (Acts 8:2, 11:2-3, 19). There's a whole class people doing dishonest business and in league with government officials just like in our local, state, and national governments. James' condemnation of wealth and clothing remind of Jesus': "Beware of the scribes, who desire to go around in long robes, love greetings in the marketplaces, the best seats in the synagogues, and the best places at feasts, who devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation" (Mk. 12:38-40). Their money felt like security and their clothing like dignity, but these very things were corroded, decayed, and witnessed against and would destroy them (v. 3). Caiaphas' justification for getting Jesus executed was that it was better for one man to die for the people rather than the whole nation perish, a true prophecy but not in the way he understood it (Jn. 11:50-52). The nation would perish and the oppressors with it. Because James trusts God and understands His covenant—the blessings and chastisements He delivers—he sees what will happen to rich oppressors.

## The Last Days

God hears hungry and oppressed people cry out to Him. He heard Israel cry out while enslaved in Egypt (Ex. 2:23). He heard them under Cushan-Rishathaim in Mesopotamia (Jdg. 3:9). Keeping poor people's wages results in hunger and death, which is why Moses forbade it: "You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether one of your brethren or one of the aliens who is in your land within your gates. Each day

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you shall give him his wages, and not let the sun go down on it, for he is poor and has set his heart on it; lest he cry out against you to the Lord, and it be sin to you” (Deut. 24:14-15; cf. Lev. 19:13, Mal. 3:5). James talks like a prophet, like Isaiah did when he told Babylon to cry: “Wail, for the day of the Lord is at hand! It will come as destruction from the Almighty” (Is. 13:6; cf. Is. 15:3, Amos 8:3). Babylon would destroy Jerusalem in 586 BC, then the Persians would conquer Babylon, and ultimately Cyrus would enable the Jews to rebuild the city and the temple. There’s a similar context where Jesus and now James teaches. He says they’ve heaped up treasure in the last days (v. 3). The last days of what? And who is the “righteous one” that they murdered (v. 6)? The “last days” refers to the Judaic aeon, the time when the temple stood and the Jews were part of God’s covenant people (cf. Acts 2:17; 2 Tim. 3:1; Heb. 1:2; 2 Pet. 3:3; 1 Jn. 2:18). Jesus predicted this: “Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Assuredly, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation” (Matt. 23:34-36). Abel is the first martyr in the Bible and Zechariah the last (2 Chron. 36), and because Jesus’ generation rejected Him, the judgement would fall on them. He tells the disciples that the temple would be destroyed, “not one stone shall be left here upon another” (Matt. 24:2), and when they ask when these things will occur, he says “Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place” (Matt. 24:34). A biblical generation is 40 years, and in AD 70, within one generation of Jesus’ death, Jerusalem was invaded and the temple destroyed by the Romans.

## The Lord of Hosts

Believers reading this letter were struggling to respond faithfully to persecution. Whenever we suffer, we cry out “How long, Lord, will it continue? Do You hear? Will You intervene?” James will return to the topic of patience in the verses to follow, but first he calls the oppressors to repent by describing the judgment that is upon them. Christ is *the* just one who was murdered, but soon James will be another. Jesus identifies so closely with His people that He asks pre-conversion Paul, “Why are you persecuting Me?” (Acts 9:4). We read this letter to learn and be reminded that persecutors do repent, but also that the Lord Sabaoth is in control when they don’t. Our cries reach His ears. He knows about the slaughter of the innocents, about people who prey on the weak and exploit the vulnerable, about all the schemes of men. It’s not just in the pages of the New Testament where the living God keeps His promises to the bless the faithful and deal with His enemies. Christ is King now, ruling and reigning at the right the Father. Just like He dealt with Egypt, the Canaanites, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, Israel and generation that rejected Jesus, so He continues to call all the nations of the world today to repent and believe, to live under His blessing or to waste their wealth in futility. This is why we live in hope. Not hope of not suffering for God and His kingdom, but hope knowing that our prayers and sacrifices are used by Him to advance His kingdom.