

“Lift Up Your Head” James 5:7-12

Discouragement; it’s not something we like to talk about or experience. But all of us face discouragement in our lives at one time or another. There seem to be an infinite number of things that can go wrong for us. Those we thought were our friends may turn against us. That really hurts. We face sickness, disease, and death. The plans we so carefully made, fall apart and our expectations are smashed beyond repair. Misfortune stalks us and our finances vanish in a black hole. I don’t need to go on with that discouraging list do I?

In our previous message, “Payday Is Coming,” we observed how the wicked oppress the poor, taking advantage for their own personal gain. In the first five verses of the chapter we looked at the warnings God gave to the wealthy. In their lives of ease and pleasure they forgot that a day of reckoning was coming.

In verses seven through twelve, God speaks to those who were being oppressed. You and I both know that when things aren’t going our way it’s easy to become discouraged. Our vision seems to narrow to the point where all we can see is the end of our nose. We too easily forget that there is more to life than our present circumstances. The songwriter knew what she was talking about when she wrote these words; “I can’t see the sun with my head to the ground, tears dim my vision and weigh my heart down. But now I’ve found the secret, when I knelt to pray, when I lift up my head and He lifts up my heart, then my troubles just all roll away.”

In our text today, James had a message for those who were discouraged. It’s a message for us too. That message forms the basis for the title of today’s study, “Lift Up Your Heads.”

Again our text is James chapter five, verses seven through twelve.

Read James 5:7-12

In our text, James provides three WORDS of encouragement that will help lift up our heads.

The First WORD of Encouragement is,

Don't Lose Heart

Dr. Joseph Stowell, in his book, “Fan The Flame,” gives this definition for the biblical use of the word, heart. “Heart is used in Scripture as the most comprehensive term for the authentic person. It is the part of our being where we desire, deliberate, and decide. It has been described as ‘the place of conscious and decisive spiritual activity, the comprehensive term for a person as a whole; his feelings, desires, passions, thought, understanding and will,’ and ‘the center of a person. The place to which God turns.’”

In verse six of this chapter, James talked about how the wealthy were oppressing the poor. The wealthy, controlled all the levers of power. They had all the influence. According to James 2:6, the rich were dragging the poor into court, and dragging their worthy name through the mud. The poor had no one to plead their cause. They were unjustly condemned and put to death. We certainly don't need to wonder why they were discouraged!

But here's a word of encouragement that moves past the circumstances and into the very core of their being; be patient. Even after all of the pain, all of the heartache, all of the injustice you've experienced, don't lose heart. Hang in there! Because, as verse four says, “...*your cries have entered into the ears of the Lord of hosts*” and he is coming in person to bring relief and vindicate your good name. Oh what a word of encouragement!

To illustrate his point, James paints a word picture they could clearly understand. They understood the need for the entire cycle of the growing season. They knew there was a long time between sowing and reaping. They knew the back-breaking work that went with each part of the process. And they knew the tedium of waiting helplessly on nature to do its part in the process.

And then, James makes an interesting comparison. The eastern farmer waited for the early rain, in the autumn of the year, to water the newly planted seeds. Wheat and barley were winter crops. The growing season followed and as the crop matured, as the heads of grain were filling out, there were the spring rains just before harvest. These rains were a part of God's promise to Israel, stated in Deuteronomy 11:14.

Here, James ties the early and latter rains to the coming of the Lord. And, he tells these who've been oppressed: just like the farmer waits patiently for the rains, you must wait patiently, because, the coming of the Lord is near at hand.

It was understood by the apostles that the day of Pentecost was the "early rain." God had poured out His Spirit on the newly planted seeds of the Gospel message. Now, James was exhorting his readers to be patient and wait for the latter rain, that outpouring that the prophet Joel and the other prophets spoke about. Are we in that time of the latter rain today? God's Spirit is moving in unprecedented ways, not so much in the western world, but in the other parts of the world. China, India, the Muslim world, all report the church is growing by leaps and bounds. The "gospel of the kingdom" is being taken to all peoples. Surely, the time of harvest is near!

Along with these events taking place in other parts of the world, we see a growing spiritual coldness in the lives of many professing Christians in the western world. Jesus told us it would be this way in Matthew twenty-four. People are "losing heart." Those who were faithful for many years are now letting go of the truth and following, in the Apostle Peter's terminology, "cunningly devised fables." They have grown weary of the battle against Satan, sin, and self and are surrendering to fatigue. But James exhorts, "don't lose heart," keep the faith, hang in there. Harvest time is coming closer. The coming of the Lord is near, and then you will be rewarded.

The Second WORD of Encouragement is,

Don't Lose Hope

Here in verses nine through eleven of our text, James encourages his readers by saying, "don't lose hope." Hope is such an important part of life. We often say, "as long as there's life, there's hope." I remember Bro. Yoder telling me how he met a Jewish man one time who said to him, "You know, we Jews have a different way of stating that maxim. We say, 'as long as there's hope, there's life.'" He was right, because the absence of hope is despair. And people who succumb to despair see no point in continuing to live. Death seems like the only option to relieve their misery.

Notice how James begins this section. He says, "*Do not groan or grumble against each other brothers, lest you come into judgment of your own.*" Isn't it true that when the pressure's

on and we see no way out, we often look for someone to blame? James warns those who were suffering injustice at the hands of the wealthy not to respond in kind; to those who oppressed them, or to their fellow sufferers. To respond that way would be an indication that they had lost the hope of future liberation. And remember, James said, the judge, Jesus Christ is standing at the door. In other words, he's just about ready to come and set things right.

It's our human nature, that when we get into difficult circumstances, we think there's no way out. Read the psalms and you'll see how David and the other writers expressed this sense of hopelessness. God seems out of touch, unreachable, and my troubles are about to bring me to ruin. In those times we need to remember God's past dealings with us and others.

Suppose you were given an urgent message for a particular group of people, a message of life and death. The one who sent you with the message stressed its importance. Then, just before you went to deliver the message, you were told, "Give the message, but the people will not receive it; they won't listen to you." James reminds his readers of the prophets of Israel, how they suffered simply because they communicated the word from the Lord. Isaiah and Jeremiah were both told at the beginning of their ministry that the people would not hear the message they had to deliver. That's not a very good way to begin, is it?

Yet, James said, imitate the example of the prophets. Even though they started with the warning that few would listen to them, they didn't lose hope. They understood the truth the apostle Paul wrote about later in Romans chapter five when he said, *"Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in **hope** of the glory of God. And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation works patience; And patience, experience; and experience, **hope**: And **hope makes not ashamed**; (hope does not disappoint or bring disgrace) because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given unto us."*

Those whose hope enables them to endure until the end are considered fortunate, verse eleven. James seems to echo the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:11 and 12. And here, he introduces that ultimate biblical illustration of endurance; the righteous man Job. If ever anyone seemed to be unjustly treated, it was this man. By the confession of none other than God Almighty, here

was a man morally blameless and upright. And yet, it seems, and I don't mean to be irreligious, that Job became a pawn in the cosmic chess game between God and Satan. Everything Job had was taken away from him; possessions, family, health and more. His own wife, the one who should've been most able to support him, said, "Curse God and die."

Yet, Job did not give up. He didn't take his wife's advice. Why not? Job 14:13-15 tell us. *"O that you would hide me in the grave, that you would keep me secret, until your wrath be past, that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me! If a man die, shall he live again? **all the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change come.** You shall call, and I will answer you: you will have a desire to the work of your hands."* Job had hope because the just judge was eventually going to come for him.

There's something else in this verse I don't want you to miss. James says, *"We have seen the end of the Lord: that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy."* What did he mean by the "end of the Lord?" The word end is *telos*. It means the goal or the purpose God has in mind. It is not, as we often use the word end, the termination point. God's goal in all that Job suffered was to bring Job closer to Himself and to increase His wealth; spiritually and materially.

Satan, the other major player in this bit of cosmic theater, had altogether opposite designs. He wanted to drive Job to despair, to bring him to financial, physical and spiritual ruin: to the point where he would blaspheme God. But Job had hope. Even in the darkest moments of his suffering when he despaired of life itself, he still had hope in God to the point that he could say, *"Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him..."*

James reminds us that, in our suffering, God's goal is to bless us in ways we cannot see at the present time. But in order to experience those blessings, we must not lose hope!

The Final WORD of Encouragement is,

Don't Lose Honor

As we look at this last verse of our text, you may be wondering where I see the concept of honor. James warns his readers about the danger of using an oath to establish the reliability of their word. And then he says, *"...lest you fall into condemnation."* At first glance, we might think this means that we ourselves will fall into judgment. But that's not what this word conveys.

It literally means the acting of a stage player, or one who pretends to be something he is not. In our common English usage we call someone like this, a hypocrite. And that is the meaning here.

Hypocrisy is the antithesis of honor. A hypocrite cannot be trusted, he cannot be taken at his word; an honorable man can. One never is really sure about the motives of a hypocrite. An honorable man has transparent motives. Do you see what I mean?

Now then, how does this fit in with our words of encouragement to the oppressed ones. Here's how. And I turn to the words of Jesus Himself in Matthew chapter twenty-four. *“Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord has made ruler over his household, to give them meat in due season? Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he comes shall find so doing. Verily I say unto you, that he shall make him ruler over all his goods. But, and if, that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord delays his coming; And shall begin to smite his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunken; The lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looks not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of, And shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the **hypocrites**: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”*

We don't have time to get into a long discussion of the Jewish use of oaths during this time in history. Let it suffice to say, they had a whole range of oaths and depending on which one they used, it indicated how likely they were to keep their word. In fact, Jesus explicitly rebuked them for this in Matthew chapter five. Their oaths were like our childish actions when we made a promise to someone but had our fingers crossed behind our back. We had no intention of keeping that promise. We only wanted to please the one we were promising with the words they wanted to hear.

As I said earlier, when the pressure is unrelenting, there is always the tendency to take out our frustration on others. James gives a strong warning against this. In fact, he begins verse twelve by saying, “Above all things...” In the first priority, before the other things I've said, do not use an oath to prove your sincerity, or you may fall into hypocrisy. You will lose your integrity and your honor.

As a Christian, you will always be among the “lower class” in the eyes of the world. Jesus said that's the way it would be. They hated Him, and they will hate His followers. But we want to try and find a different way. So we're tempted to make little compromises with the

world, thinking they'll accept us. Do you find yourself doing things and saying things in order to get ahead financially? In order to be accepted by a certain social grouping? James encourages us; don't do that. Be genuine. Remember, the ultimate rewards don't come in this life. So be real. Be a person of integrity. Let everyone know where you stand. Speak the truth, but speak it in love.

Brother or sister, don't be discouraged. Don't lose heart, don't lose hope, and above all, be genuine and don't lose your honor. Lift up your head; be patient, the coming of the Lord is drawing near.