

THE LETTER OF JAMES – PART 8

COMMISSIONING TO PATIENCE, PRAYER AND REPENTANCE

I. Having condemned the worldly contentment of the wealthy, the letter then turns to encouragement for the suffering.

A. The call to patience at the beginning shifts attention from the wealthy and sets up the theme for the next section, the patience and confidence in suffering, based upon hope in God's providence.

1. The word for patience here, *makrothysesate*, is not a common one in classical society, but is used in the Bible (the New Testament or the Septuigint) primarily to express God's love for us, or our call to love others in the context of divine love. See Ps. 86:15; Sir. 29:8 (more in the context of generosity); 1 Cor. 13:4; 2 Pet. 3:9 (closest to this context.) The term implies long suffering and the root words *macro* and *thameo* imply gathering together something over the long period of time.

2. The address is now again to "Brothers" a term of endearment, in contrast to the harshness of the previous section.

3. There was perhaps a temptation to be resentful or jealous of the wealthy, which the letter warns against.

4. The call is in anticipation of "coming of the Lord," in Greek, the *parousia*, a term of art for the judgment day when Jesus returns in glory. See Matt. 24:3, 27, 37, 29; 1 Cor. 15:23; 1 Thess 2:19; 2 Thess. 2:1, 8-9; 2 Pet. 1:16, 3:14, 12; 1 John 2:28. These other passages that refer to the *parousia* typically both speak of the great signs that will accompany it, but also warn against trying to determine when it will happen, instead telling people always to be ready.

- In the Septuigint Old Testament, the term *parousia* generally meant the coming of a king. See Neh. 2:6; Judith 10:18; 2 Macc. 8:12, 15:21. The implication is that we are awaiting the return of the King of Glory to disperse evil and reward those who have faithfully served Him. See Luke 19:12-27.

- Twice more in the next two verses, the letter will emphasize this coming of the Lord.

B. The notion of gathering leads logically to the analogy of the farmer waiting for his crops.

- In the Holy Land there would be both early rains (around October-November) and late rains (in April- May), both of which were needed for the harvest. These rains were signs of God's favor. See Duet. 11:14; Jer. 5:24. The implication is that many times of struggle may be needed for the harvest of souls, but that those struggles should be seen as sources of blessing from God. Thus, Psalm 129 describes the oppressed person as being plowed and furrowed like a field, but in that case, the sufferings are more something that God releases him from, rather than a trial to be rewarded.

- The letter is building upon the notion of the Church gathering in the harvest of people for God. See, e.g., Matt. 9:37; Luke 10:2; John 4:35; 2 Cor. 9:10. The time of judgment (whether final or transitional) is also sometimes described as a harvest. See Joel 4:13; Matt. 13:39; Rev. 14:15.

C. The letter then tells the reader again to be patient and "make your heart firm."

- The letter again emphasizes the parousia, this time saying that it is near. The implication is that the kingdom of God is not merely a distant judgment, but is breaking in here and now. See Matt. 3:2; Mark 1:15; Peter 4:7. There is a current judgment here and now, in addition to the final one at the end of human history.

- It was a constant refrain of St. Paul that we must be steadfast in the faith. See 1 Cor. 16:13; 2 Cor. 1:24; gal. 5:1; Phil. 1:27, 4:1; 1 Thess. 3:8; 2 Thess. 2:15.

- Elsewhere New Testament Epistles speak of God strengthening our hearts, reflecting the need for grace. See 1 Thess. 3:13; 1 Pet. 5:10. Here the epistle focuses also on the need for personal and community effort.

D. The letter applies this principle especially to warn against grumbling against each other.

1. The instruction very much reflects a similar saying of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. See Matt. 7:1-2. The idea is the same, i.e. that if one expects forgiveness of one's sins one must be willing to extend that forgiveness to others.

- There may also be a caution against rash judgment that leads to erroneous condemnation of others.

2. Reflecting again the idea that God alone is the Judge, the letter warns that the judge is standing at the door.

- The idea is that one cannot put off a change in one's behavior,

assuming that there will be time later.

- Jesus had earlier warned that, when signs of great travail come, the Judge will be at hand. See matt. 24:33; Mark 13:29. However, those saying appear to mean more of the judgment of the current age, for Jesus says that the current generation will not pass away until all of these things are fulfilled. The time for a generation to pass away was about 40 years. See Num. 14:20-35; Ps. 95:10; Heb. 3:9. Thus, the (at least initial) fulfillment of the prophecies of judgment was to occur within 40 years of the early 30s. The spread of Christianity through much of the Empire, civil wars for the imperial throne, and the destruction of Jerusalem, which was an image of the end times, all occurred within that time.

- Thus, the letter (written before the civil wars and the destruction of Jerusalem) is not saying that the end of the world in its entirety is at hand, but rather the judgment of God, both for individuals and nations is.

- The Book of Revelation also speaks of Jesus as judge telling the church at Laodicia that He stands at the door, here calling to repentance and companionship with God, and away from judgment.

E. The letter then cites the example of the prophets and of Job to encourage the faithful to patience.

1. Although the Bible records only the martyrdom of one prophet, Zechariah, see 2 Chron. 24:20-22, there were records of other prophets such as Jeremiah and Baruch being martyred. And Jesus speaks of the persecution that the prophets faced and the persecution that the new prophets and wise men of the new faith would face. See 23:29-36; Luke 11:46-51; see also Acts 7:52.

2. The letter is indicating that, by their patient suffering, Christians can join in the mission of the prophets, indicating again our dignity. See Matt. 5:12; Luke 6:22-23.

3. Reflecting either the final beatitude, or possibly the prophecy of Daniel regarding time of great distress before judgment, see Dan. 12:12.

4. The letter then describes the patience of Job as another example of one who endured innocent suffering, without ever knowing why, but was rewarded at the end with both prosperity and the presence of God.

- Job at time seemed impatient when his friends were not giving him any real comfort or answers.
- However, despite the cries of despondency, he did not sin, nor did his faith in the end fail. See Job 1:22, 29:25-27.
- Christians now know more about the reason for their suffering, and thus "have seen the purpose of the Lord." All the more reason is there for perseverance.

F. The letter describes the Lord's purpose with a paraphrase from three psalms of praise and from the central theme of God's covenant with His Chosen People. See Ex. 34:6; Ps. 103:8, 111:4, 145:8.

- Part of the idea is that the new covenant Jesus makes with us takes suffering and makes it a cause for praise.

II. There is then a transitional instruction against swearing or taking oaths.

A. The instruction is very similar to Jesus' instruction in the Sermon on the Mount. See Matt. 5:34-37.

1. There is a question about why the letter does not simply quote Jesus directly. It is perhaps because St. James did not remember the exact quotation, or perhaps because he did not want to make this one instruction more important than the others by referring it back to Jesus.

2. In any case, the idea is that, if one is honest and straightforward, there is no need for an elaboration on any statement,

- The very need for oaths comes from the potential for dishonesty in human nature. Hopefully, at least among the faithful, there would not be a need for such oaths.

3. Building on the theme of judging, the letter warns that condemnation comes from unnecessary oaths.

- At one level, it is simply there is simply the common sense that taking oaths lightly can set up the occasion of sin. See Sir. 23:7-11. Or, if one takes oaths on some matters and not others, people may feel themselves not bound to the truth in the latter case. Cf. Matt. 23:16-22.

- But there is also a general notion that taking oaths lightly (that is calling upon God to affirm a statement) lessens one's respect for God.

4. There is a question about how this section is connected to the latter one. One possibility is that, if people lack the patience that the section commends, it can be easier to take oaths and commit other sins of speech.

- Or it could simply be the final one of the cautions before the letter turns to its concluding more positive recommendations.

III. The letter concludes with a series of recommendations regarding how positively to deal with various situations, always emphasizing the importance of the community,

A. First, this concluding section calls for prayers for those who are suffering and singing praise by those who are cheerful or more literally confident.

- This passage is a shorthand way of reminding people not to forget prayer, either in good times or bad. See Eph. 6:18; 1 Thess. 5:16-17. It is the complement of the preceding sections' condemnation of uncharitable or impious speech.

- The term for being cheerful or confident, *euthymein*, implies a cheerfulness not based upon any external circumstances, but rather on confidence of final victory. See Acts 27:22, 25.

B. The letter then tells the faithful to call for the priests of the Church to pray over and anoint anyone who is sick.

1. This passage is one of the few that the Church has handed down an infallible interpretation of. The Council of Trent authoritatively declared that it refers to anointing of the sick. See Council of Trent, Decree on the Sacrament of Extreme Unction Ch. 1, Canon 1.

2. Jesus had already said that cures that come from laying hands on the sick would be a sign of His kingdom on earth; and some of His disciples had anointed the sick during His public ministry. See Mark 6:13, 16:18. But this passage is the most extensive comment on the anointing of the sick in the Bible.

3. It describes four of the five essential elements of the sacrament.

- First, it is given to a sick person. The term used here, *astheno*, refers to someone who is seriously ill and could mean someone near death. See Matt. 25:36 (the ill in general); John 4:46 (a situation where the person is near death, but that fact must be explained), 11:1-4, 14 (Lazarus, who was near death); Acts 9:37 (the illness before death); Phil. 2:26-27 (also a deathly illness, but one that God saved the ill person from.) The Church has taken a middle position that the sacrament should be provided to anyone who has an illness that could be fatal, even if that is rather unlikely.
- Second, the anointing and prayer are by the *presbytoi* of the church. The original Greek meaning of *presbytoi* was an elder, or a wise old man. But the New Testament uses it to describe a specific office in the Church, connected to the apostles and then the bishops (called *episcopoi*), but lower than them. See, e.g., Acts 11:30, 15:2,-6, 22-23, 16:4, 20:17, 21:18; 1 Tim. 5:17-19; Titus 1:5-6. This position is now called priest in English, but it is still *presbyter* in Latin. And the sacrament can only be provided by a bishop or a priest.
- Third, the priest would pray over the sick person, a prayer that will "save him and raise him up." The emphasis is on the eternal salvation, being raised up by Jesus on the last day. See John 6:39; James 1:21, 2:14, 4:12, 5:20. But there is also an implication of healing.
- Fourth, the priest would anoint the sick person. Anointing was a common sign associated with healing. See Mark 6:3; Luke 10:34. The term here is *aleipsantes*, is different from the term for the anointing of priests, prophets and kings. It is more specific for the ill.
- The one element not mentioned is the laying on of hands. Although perhaps implied by the idea of "praying over" the sick person, that element is taken more from the end of the Gospel of Mark.

C. The letter then proceeds onto a commendation of the faithful confessing sins to each other.

1. It is not clear whether a public confession or private confession is implied here. The confession seems to be more of a sign of repentance than the conferring of the power to absolve on the confessor. That power is implied more in the words of Jesus Himself. See Matt. 16:9, 18:18; John 20:23.
2. The confessing of personal sins was required in the Old Testament in certain limited cases, including the taking of a rash vow. See Lev. 5:5; Num. 5:7. But by the time of John the Baptist confessing of sins was apparently a common part of showing repentance. See, e.g., Matt. 3:6; Mark 1:5.
3. The idea of confessing is in part so that prayers will be more powerful, both prayers for forgiveness, and the prayers offered by one made more righteous by being forgiven. See Luke 18:9-14.
4. The letter draws an interesting analogy to Elijah's prayer to begin and end the famine in Israel. The implication is that the prayers of the righteous bring blessings upon the world, but also may bring judgment if the world rejects the message of salvation. See, e.g., Rev. 11:6. The time frame of three and a half years is not in the Bible's description of Elijah. But it is a common time of suffering for the faithful before salvation comes. See, e.g., Dan. 7:25, 12::7; rev. 11:2, 12:14.

D. The letter then concludes with a call to bring those who have gone astray back to the faith.

1. Thus the prophetic mission of calling people to repentance is now given to all the faithful.
2. This mission "will save the soul from death" and "will cover a multitude of sins."
 - It is not clear whether the sins it will cover and the soul it will save are that of the person going astray or that of the person calling him back. It could be either. And, in the latter case, the letter is building further upon a tradition that one enters more into the realm of forgiveness as one applies that grace and forgiveness to others.
3. In any case, the letter thus ends with a paradoxically optimistic caution. It cautions that even the faithful may stray from the truth, but holds out hope and a calling for return.