

## **LIVING BETWEEN THE TIMES**

**James 5:7–20**

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James 5:7–20 (NIV)

“Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near. Don’t grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door! Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job’s perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy. Above all, my brothers, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your ‘Yes’ be yes, and your ‘No,’ no, or you will be condemned. Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops. My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.”

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I've called this message "Living Between the Times." The letter of James ends much of the way it began, by focusing upon those who were experiencing trials of many kinds. James presents to us the picture that we as Christians are living between the times, between the time of His first coming and the time of His second coming. He suggests to us, in these verses before us today, that two perspectives dominate our life as we live between Christmas and the Second Coming of the Lord. The perspectives are that we should live with patience (verses 7–12) and that we live with prayer (verses 13–18).

#### **I. Let's look first at living with patience.**

It's hard to be patient in life. It's hard to be patient at Christmas time. It's sometimes difficult to wait until Christmas Eve or Christmas day to open the gifts under the tree. Especially for the younger ones. And sometimes for us older ones as well. Our family, no matter what age member of the family he is, generally has shaken each gift a number of times, sometimes without anyone watching, before they're actually opened. Looking at a Christmas gift reminds one of the themes of hope. James is really saying that there is hope out there for us Christians. There is a future coming that is all gift-wrapped and ready to open at the return of the Lord.

James has been dealing with times in our life when things aren't so good. When we left off last week at the early part of chapter 5, we saw him writing to Christian tenant farmers, peasants living on the land filled with all the economic injustice that is still present in third world countries and in some places of this country. There still will not be complete justice until the Lord returns. James is reminding these believers of that. There are some things that cannot be cured in this lifetime, because sin is so pandemic. It will not all be eradicated. Work what you will, but you will not bring in a totally just society. You will not bring in the fair deal for everyone. It must wait until the Lord comes.

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That's our hope. It's a hope that's on a level far different than a wish. Sometimes we say "I hope" and we mean "I wish." But when the word "hope" is used in the Scriptures, it's used of a certain event that is going to come. Like, "I hope that tomorrow the sun will rise." Of course it will. But even more certain than the sun rising is the coming of the Lord. The Lord comes. "The Judge," James says, "stands at the door." We might well ask: "How can this be?" After all, haven't almost two thousand years passed since these words were first penned? How can we say "the Lord is coming"? The Judge is at the door.

We say it from two perspectives. One is that, from our perspective, this is the only life that we live. And it is really always the end of time for us. Existentially, we always live on the edge of eternity. There are some people who say, "I wonder if this is the end of the age." I always say, "Of course it is. It's the end of your age. And it's the end of my age. This is the only life I've got and after that, it is the end of the age." So we're to live expecting the Lord to come. Not that our life is going to end, shriveled up in death and dirt over our grave is God's last word concerning us. It's not "the Lord comes." He's at the door.

A second perspective we ought to have, when we say the Lord is at the door, is that that is from God's perspective. Peter reminds us, in 2 Peter, that his perspective of time is at variance with ours. A thousand years with us is but a day with Him.

In C. S. Lewis' *Tales of Narnia*, the children would enter the wardrobe and they'd find themselves in Narnia, and weeks and months and even years would go by in Narnian time. When the story was over in Narnia, they would come back into the wardrobe, step back into time, and it was just a second that had gone by, while years had gone by in Narnia. That's the way it is with God's wardrobe. He steps out of that wardrobe into earth. From our perspective, thousands of

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years were going by, but when He steps back into his world and his time, it is just a moment that has gone by.

The Lord's coming is near, it is at the door. Since He stands outside time and space, and He created both, He is always ready to return. James admits that, although the Lord is standing at the door, the Christian life may yet have a while to be lived. The Christian life is not a 60-yard dash. It's not a sprint. It's a marathon. One must be in it for the long haul. So four times in verses 7–11 we are called to patience. Two times in verse 11 we're called to perseverance. We're given three examples of patience and perseverance.

**A.** The first example is the example of the farmer, who puts his seed in the ground and then must wait for the early rains and the latter rains. There's absolutely nothing he can do once the seed is in the ground, he must wait for the rains, he must wait for the harvest. So it is in the Christian life. Once we've committed to Christ, there is great deal of our destiny that we don't personally have control over. We must simply wait and be patient and persevere.

**B.** We're reminded, in the second example in verse 10, of the prophets who persevered and every prophet had a difficult time. In fact, their faithfulness to God's commands did not make life easier for them. It made life more difficult. How we have flip-flopped that in twentieth-century America, where we have bought a bill of goods that somehow the Christian life is going to make our lot easier rather than more difficult. In many places in the world still today, to be a Christian is to be marked for persecution and for suffering. To be a Christian doesn't mean that we're suddenly marked out for a pie-in-the-sky kind of existence. We're in it for a marathon, for loyalty to Christ, not the benefit of immediate reward.

The prophets are examples to us, whether it was Elijah, who was hounded and hunted, or Jeremiah, who was thrown into a deep pit and left to starve, or Ezekiel, who suffered the painful

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loss of his wife in the very circumstances and place where he ministered, or Amos, told to quit prophesying because he was a traitor, or Daniel, thrown into the lion's den, or John the Baptist, arrested and beheaded, or Stephen, who said, "Didn't your fathers kill all the prophets? Which of them did they not kill?" (Acts 7:52). The prophets are reminders to us that, when we're not seeing God do miracles, we still must be faithful to the message that He has entrusted to us, and persevere.

C. Then the third example that James gives us of patience is that of Job, the illustration *par excellence* of perseverance. He loses his oxen and his donkeys and his camels; his employees were killed; his children were killed; he developed boils on his body and itched from the top of his head to the sole of his feet; his wife said, "Curse God and die!" (Job 2:9) and proved to be a thorn in his flesh. Then his friends came to comfort him and instead of comforting him, they tried to tell him, "You've done something wrong with your life, and inflicted psychological pain on top of all the other pain." What did he do? He said, "I've lost everything, but I haven't lost God. And I'm keeping to God." "Though he slay me yet I will trust him" (Job 13:15). And God established him. Job stuck it out.

That's what this part of God's Word is telling us to do in life. It's telling us to stick it out. We're called to be patient and to stand firm.

The word "stand firm" is the same root verb that is used in Luke 9:51, when Jesus set His face to Jerusalem. We're to keep our heart firm or steadfast. We're to set the direction of our interior life and stay with it. Not flip-flop, not be inconsistent. But have steely resolution and determination.

With God's help, we will stay the course of the Christian life. We'll stay the course in our relationships. We'll work through our problems and not run away from our problems. The Christian life calls us, again and again, to work through, not flee from, but work through, work

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through. It takes a lot of work, a lot of grit, a lot of patience, a lot of perseverance to succeed in life, to succeed in family, to succeed in relationships, to succeed in anything. Persevere. Be patient until the Lord's coming. It is always too soon to quit. Don't give up. Keep going. God is there to meet you.

James is telling us, in these verses, as he talks about patience, that there are going to be stresses as we wait for the coming of the Lord. Therefore, don't grumble against one another (James 5:9). He tells us that sometimes we're even going to be upset with God and in our careless speech, we might even take an oath that involves God's name, because we're just under so much pressure, we don't think God's coming through, and suddenly we find it out of our mouth—an oath involving God's name—which is to mistrust Him. James says, "Handle those pressures. Don't grumble. Don't take God's name in vain. Wait patiently for the coming of the Lord."

### **II. The second major theme that James addresses today is the theme of living with prayer.**

There are four things he says about prayer.

**A.** First, pray personally. "Are any of you in trouble? Let him pray" (James 5:13). That's the time we need to pray, when we're in trouble. When we're down. But when we're down, we become discouraged and despair, and we might forget to pray. So James says, "When you're down, pray." Are you up? Are things going well? Are you happy? Praise. Let your prayer come to God in the form of praise. Why should we pray when we're happy? Because we can get lazy and self-sufficient and complacent and at ease and forget that the Lord is integral to every moment of our life. So whatever our circumstance—whether we're down in the pit or up in the heights—pray.

**B.** Then a second kind of praying he tells us to do is to pray for the sick. "If any are sick among you, let him or her call for the elders of the church. Let them come and anoint with oil. The

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prayer of faith shall serve the sick person. The Lord will raise him up” (James 5:14-15).

Obviously there are many ways to pray for the sick. When we’re sick ourselves, before we reach for the aspirin bottle, we should pray. That’s personal prayer. Sometimes, we just simply ask a friend to come alongside of us and pray with us. In a group of two or three, we’re prayed for and God heals us. Sometimes, we’re in a service where the gifts of healing are functioning, and we’re healed in that way.

But here is a particular procedure. When we’re very sick and cannot come to church and cannot come to a friend, and we’re on our back, we know that the person is very sick because in the Greek language he’s called the “weak or the worn-out one.” The elders pray over them, which infers that the sick person is before them, laid out on bed. We also know that the sick person is not asked to have any faith. There are those who say, “You can never be made well unless you have faith.” Sometimes you’re so sick you don’t have faith. So it’s the elders who are asked to pray the prayer of faith, not the sick person. They’re weak and weary and worn out. So here’s a person who cannot come on their own. They put in a call. “Send the elders.” Why the elders? If I were sick, I would call the people who had the gifts for healing. Why the elders? The person is too sick to get to the community of the Lord, the church, the community of faith, and the person’s room is too small. The whole church can’t fit into it. But the church should be officially represented at the bedside of that weak and weary one. How does one officially represent that? The elders come—maybe the whole group of elders, maybe several elders. But they, in standing there, represent the whole community of believers, the church. I do this when I’m praying for the sick. I say, “I am here today to represent the many in the body of Christ who are praying for you. It’s not just a moment you and I get together in prayer. It’s a moment when all the saints of God

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are joining in.” We express that presence of the body of Christ, the presence of the Lord, when we pray for the sick.

James says “anoint with oil” (James 5:14). Why oil? We still anoint with oil today. Oil, in biblical times, was sometimes used as a treatment in an illness. The Good Samaritan, for example, poured oil on the wounded and by the side of the road. But James is not thinking of the elders as doctors, pouring oil out on a person to make them well. He’s thinking of oil as a symbol, much like Jesus had sent out the Twelve, two by two, to anoint with oil and heal the sick. It was an aid to faith. It was to say that, even as oil will heal some cuts, this oil symbolically represents the presence of the Lord, who is able to heal all ills. It is not the oil that heals. It is the prayer of faith that saves the sick person.

What is the “prayer of faith”? Sometimes I wonder if we do not think the prayer of faith is something you pray when you’re praying loudly. Can you pray the prayer of faith and whisper? I wonder if at times we think God is deaf. That, in order for God to hear us, we’ve got to yell loud at God.

What is the prayer of faith? The prayer of faith is a settled confidence in God and in His Word and in His healing power and in His ultimate intentions for us. “The prayer of faith shall save the sick one. The Lord will raise him up” (James 5:15).

Here we need to do a little interpretation. Do the words “the prayer of faith shall save the sick one” and “the Lord will raise him up” automatically guarantee healing—physical healing—whenever it’s prayed? If so, then, why do even Christians die? Why, in 1 Corinthians 15, is the body sown in dishonor and weakness if God always heals in response to the prayer of elders? How do we handle that? The prayer of faith shall save the sick one. There are two words that

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James could have used. And James is master enough of the Greek language that he is being very careful, as the Holy Spirit guides him.

He could have used the definite word, which is non-ambiguous, which is the word “heal.” The Lord will “heal” the sick one. Or the prayer of faith will “help” the sick one.

But instead, he uses a broader word, the word “save.” The Lord will “save” the sick one. When you look through the New Testament at how this precise word is used, you find it used in two ways. It is used of physical healing, such as the hemorrhaging woman in Matthew 9, whose faith saves her, that is, makes her whole. But it is also used of personal salvation, of wholeness, of God ultimately giving us everything that he intends for us. And it is used that way in James 5:20, where the sinner will be saved from death. Not physical death, but spiritual death.

Then “the Lord will raise him up.” The word “raise” also is a somewhat ambiguous word, because it can mean “to be raised up” like the paralytic was raised up and walked. But it also can mean “to be raised up in the last days.” As in 1 Corinthians 15, where the body is sown in dishonor but raised in honor. It is sown corruptible, it is raised incorruptible.

So what we have here, in the anointing of oil for the sick, is that James gives us words that are capable of expansion, and it is obviously his intent that the elders, when they come, should pray for physical healing. The Catholic church has made a doctrine of extreme unction out of this—where you go and simply commit the person that’s going to die, it’s the last thing before they die. But here the expectation is that the person is going to be made well. So that’s the first expectation. What happens if the prayer of faith has been given, the anointing with oil has been carried out in obedience to the Scripture, yet the sick one has not been healed? Then the Lord will save the sick person and He will raise them up.

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We realize that not all healing is now. We have not, in our physical bodies, yet experienced all this to salvation—glorification. The resurrection is yet occurring, and we must commit ourselves to God’s course and His plan for our lives. And realize that, if He doesn’t heal the sick one, He has not abandoned the sick one. There are people who lay on a serious bed of illness and feel that God maybe has made a choice against them, and that He has abandoned them, and He isn’t concerned about them. But no. The prayer of faith shall save the sick one and the Lord will raise him or her up. That sick one is never abandoned by God. We’re kept secure in God’s hands. So James gives us some language, so that, when we’re caught on that bed of illness, we’re not left alone by the body of Christ. How terrible to be cut off from the people of God and prayer in the days of our life when we need it the most, when we’re at death’s door or when we’re so ill we can hardly moan. How terrible to be left alone. The body of Christ is meant to be there. The elders are meant to be called.

**C.** Then James reminds us of another kind of praying. Praying among fellow believers. The last part of verse 16 tells us that we’re to pray for one another, that our sins might be forgiven, because the sick person may have had sin. They will be forgiven. But we need to “confess our sins one to another.” What does that mean? To stand up in a body such as this and say, “I’ve done so and so.” Not really. It means to go to the person against whom we have sinned, and say to them, “I sinned against you. Will you forgive me?” “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you might be healed.”

**D.** Then the last thing James tells us about prayer, to encourage us to pray, is, “The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective” (verse 16). The word “powerful” there is a word which implies that it has tremendous inherent potential. Untapped resources. Prayer is that way. Prayer looks plain and simple and ordinary. But if you only knew what was inside, what power,

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what riches are waiting to be released. That's what James says to us about prayer. Prayer is inherently powerful, and we may overlook it and say, when everything else fails, "I'll pray." But prayer is immensely powerful, it is effective. So pray!

So as an example of that, we're pointed to Elijah, a man just like us, who had ordinary human feelings. He wasn't some big spiritual giant. It's not just the spiritual giants who get their prayers answered. It's fallible people like us. People like Elijah who, in one moment, have high hopes, and the next moment, are languishing in a sea of depression and despair. One moment, they're willing to confront kings and queens with power and authority. The next moment, at the whiff of danger, they're flying into the desert for cover. That's Elijah. That's us. The Bible says that he prayed earnestly. The Greek there simply says, "With prayer he prayed." He prayed, and God answered. We're encouraged to pray.

The last two verses of James 5 bring us to a wrap-up on the whole letter. Because the purpose of his whole letter was to bring the wanderer back. They were tough times for Christians. These are tough times now too. We do wander. There's probably not a person who hasn't wandered away some from the Lord or a significant teaching of His, or who isn't aware of disobedience in their life. We don't start out to do that. We don't premeditate it. We don't say, "We're going to wander away from the Lord." That's what wandering is all about. It's just going away. It's sliding. It's being careless. We find ourselves away from Him suddenly. We wake up and realize it and this letter has been designed to turn the sinner back to the Lord, who covers a multitude of our sins.

We're to do that then for one another. Not just the pastor. Not just the elder of the church. But we're to look around in our own life and say, "Who's wandering?" "Am I wandering from the

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Lord?" I want to be back where I belong with the Lord. Is somebody I know wandering? Go to that person and encourage them and bring them back to God.

At this season of the year, our focus is on the first coming of the Lord. But our Scripture today has reminded us that we are actually living between the times, we're living between the first and the second coming. It is quite natural also to realize we will never believe in the second coming if we have not believed in the first. If you have not believed in His first coming, that He is God's Son, sent to be your Savior, then there's no better day than today, no better moment than now, to open your life to Jesus Christ and receive Him as your Lord.

If our greatest need had been for information, God would have sent us an educator.

If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist.

If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist.

If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer.

But our greatest need was for forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior.

### **Closing Prayer**

Our Father, we come to You today through the good grace and love of the Lord Jesus Christ, who came to forgive us our sin and bring us into fellowship with You, who came to purge us of our past and invite us to a glorious hope of the future. I pray for those in this congregation of whom You're not now the Lord of their life. I pray that today they will come to that confession of faith in their inward life that acknowledges You as their Lord. Our Lord, we thank You for each person. You will work on their desire. I pray that You will be Lord of their life. If there is anyone here who is without You as their Lord, I pray that they would say with me today, "Jesus, come into my life." Lord, give us Your presence to hold on one more day, one more week, one more month, one more year, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Give us strength in our trial.

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Give us courage to go to the people we've wronged and seek forgiveness. Give us strength to live for You. We ask, in Jesus' name. Amen.