

*James 5:12-20.*

*What does a living faith look like? James' epistle has been a walk through practical Christianity. He's touched upon endurance in trials, submission to God's Word, the use of our speech, pride, etc.*

*The letter closes with a word on integrity when suffering, praying for those who suffer, and being your brother's keeper.*

Of all the books in the New Testament, none is packed tighter with commands than James' epistle—five chapters, 55 commands. It's not what you'd expect in a letter to hurting people who have little money and feel the sting of persecution. We might expect something lighter or therapeutic, not a letter that's convicting or forceful.

Life is messy and filled with hardships, isn't it? And we want to help a hurting friend, but often aren't quite sure what to say: "It's going to be okay", "You're going to be fine," "Well, it could be worse." The problem is we don't know if it'll be okay. We don't know if things will turn out fine or how much worse they could get. Well-meaning statements, but they aren't very certain or helpful.

We can do little to change the circumstances of life, but we can encourage others to think rightly about their problems. This is what James did. At the outset of his letter, he reminded the downcast of God's sovereignty and goodness (Jas 1:2-5, 17). He exhorted them to humbly submit to God's Word (Jas 1:19-22), to act on this instead of their own feelings and wisdom. He helped them see the nature of true faith, what it looks like in the midst of a trial (Jas 2:14-26). He tells them to guard their speech as well (Jas 3:1-12).

It isn't what we might expect, but James offers what we need. He closes his letter with counsel pertaining to trials. Wealthy landowners exploited many of his original readers (Jas 5:1-6). He counseled them to patiently endure by keeping the coming of the Lord in mind (Jas 5:8). Be a person of integrity even when suffering, pray for others as they suffer, and be your brother's keeper.

**EMPTY PROMISES**

**(JAMES 5:12)**

"I do swear that I will, to the utmost of my power, support, maintain and defend the said United States against the said King George the Third..." What Benedict Arnold swore to do and then did weren't the same. He appealed to the truthfulness of God to back his integrity and then proved himself a traitor.

It isn't just a bunch of meaningless words to say: "I swear to God I'll..." Realize these words invoke the integrity of the Living God. On the basis of Him who never lies, you who sometimes lie swear to do something. In the case of Benedict Arnold, he swore to do and then didn't. Worse than being a traitor, he made God to be a liar.

*James 5:12—"But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'yes' be yes and your 'no' be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation."*

The psalmist wrote of the man who "swears to his own hurt and does not change" (Psa 15:4). He's the kind of man who gives his word and keeps it at all cost. Even when it isn't beneficial, he keeps his word. Why? Because he said so. He's an honorable person, a man of true integrity.

**REGARD YOUR GOOD NAME AS THE RICHEST JEWEL YOU CAN POSSIBLY BE POSSESSED OF...**

**CREDIT IS LIKE FIRE; WHEN ONCE YOU HAVE KINDLED IT YOU MAY EASILY PRESERVE IT, BUT IF YOU ONCE EXTINGUISH IT, YOU WILL FIND IT AN ARDUOUS TASK TO REKINDLE IT AGAIN**

— SOCRATES.

"But above all, my brothers, do not swear..." (Jas 5:12). Hardships and perhaps unforeseen events led to some believers breaking their word. It seems they failed so often, they started swearing by things in heaven and earth to show they *really* meant business. It would have been better to say nothing than commit and fail.

When commitments are strengthened with an oath, it's a sign your word has come to mean nothing. James doesn't prohibit oaths; Jesus didn't either (Matt 5:33-38). The issue in both cases was a lack of integrity. Oaths appeal to the integrity of another—fine to do when two parties aren't familiar with each other. It's an issue when the two are well acquainted.

We may not make a formal oath in our everyday speech, but we still bolster our commitments. A simple 'yes' just isn't enough. We've broken our word in the past, but we *promise* to keep it this time. Why promise if your word means something to all who know you?

# Vowing, Praying, Keeping

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Christians should be a people who reflect God's honor and integrity in their actions and speech. They keep their word even when it hurts. Their commitments are as good as done.

## POWERFUL PRAYERS

(JAMES 5:13-18)

O what peace we often forfeit,  
O what needless pain we bear,  
All because we do not carry  
Everything to God in prayer!<sup>1</sup>

Why is prayer so often a last resort? After exhausting all our options, we turn to God. *Well, I guess all I can do now is pray about it.* It's a sign we don't believe prayer amounts to much.

James thought much differently. To Christians overwhelmed with their trials he reminds: "The prayer of a righteous person has great power" (Jas 5:16). God hears His people pray. When suffering? Pray. When cheerful? Sing praises (Jas 5:13).

"Is anyone among you sick?" (Jas 5:14). Sickness is part of life in a fallen world, but there's no reason to endure it alone. The church is made of people saved through faith in Jesus Christ. As He has loved them, so they should be known by their love for one another (John 13:34-35). In sickness and in health, believers are committed to one another, carrying each other's burdens (Gal 6:2). In this closeness it seems natural that James encourages us in our sickness to "call for the elders of the church, and let them pray."

Prayer is powerful because of the God who hears. He invites us to pray, and He always hears, but does He always heal? No. *But I prayed the prayer of faith—God will heal the one who's sick!* That's not what James says in verse 15. He doesn't use the same word for "sick" throughout this chapter. Here is a word only found in Hebrews 12:3. It speaks of spiritual weariness.

Prayer is powerful to provide physical healing, but it's also powerful to heal spiritual weakness. "And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven" (Jas 5:15). Weariness, even despair, can be the result of wrong thinking and living. If that's the case, James says to pray, and "confess your sins to one another" (Jas 5:16).

Does the Lord heal in miraculous ways today? Of course, but He doesn't promise He always will. If it only required "the prayer of

faith" to overcome all sickness, James and all the apostles would still be with us today... but they aren't.

Prayer is powerful, but God is God. When He answers, it's never because He's compelled by our great faith—He answers because He's faithful. Charlatans promise healing over sickness and death. Christ promises "never will I leave you, nor forsake you" (Heb 13:5). He walks with His people in all things until the day He brings each one home to live with Him forever.

## MY BROTHER'S KEEPER

(JAMES 5:19-20)

*James 5:20 — "...whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."*

All of us understand the weariness of an ongoing trial. Some trials let up; others never do. And weeks that turn into months without relief weigh heavily upon the soul. For James and his original readers, there was no escape from the persecution of being Jewish and a Christian. Some it seems were ready to give up, and in their despair, started "wandering from the truth" (Jas 5:19).

What should the church do with wanderers? Pursue them. Go after the one who's gone astray (Matt 18:12-13). It's uncomfortable and difficult, but "whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul" (Jas 5:20). Nothing could be so serious as departing from the truth, proving you never knew Christ, and weren't saved. Only divine judgment awaits for rejecting the Son of God.

*Hebrews 3:13—"But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."*

The author of Hebrews knew the same struggle as James' readers. He told the strong to encourage the weak (Heb 12:12-13), to "exhort one another every day." Why? Because of the danger of spiritual hardness. Ongoing trials can lead to doubt the goodness of God, even His existence. James encourages the church family to watch out for one another. Be involved in each other's lives that this wouldn't happen.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Scriven, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."