

James 5:1-20

Well in just a while we will baptise Ewa, Sylwester and Jon. It is another step on the path of faith that God has been taking them along but it is only another step. Tomorrow they will wake up and there will be another day in which to live as followers of Jesus. How are they to do that and how are we to do that if we are here this morning and are followers of Jesus?

How do we live as followers of Jesus? Well there are many things I could say this morning but as we are going through this letter of James I am going to limit what I say to what God says through James in this last chapter of the letter and then I am also going to limit what I say to about 20 minutes so I can't deal as fully with these verses as I might like.

I want to pick up three big themes from this chapter which relate to how we live as Christians. They are security, perseverance and prayer.

1 There's no security in wealth v1-6

I'm not very clever with finance but I am intrigued by all the adverts for investments and shares and pensions. I'm given to understand that in order to get a good pension I should have started building up a fund 10 years before I was born. Now please don't get me wrong in this because I think it is good to make sure if you can that you make provision for a pension, though I am pretty sure for these three young people being baptised today that may be a thought a long way from their minds. However, what God is saying here to the original readers and to us is that such provision is no security. Look at the last part of v3, "you have hoarded wealth in the last days". James was speaking at this point to rich people whose focus in life had been building up a large pension pot. That was their security. However, in the same way that God spoke to the rich fool in the parable Jesus told and called him a fool, James told these people to weep and wail v1. That sounds stupid doesn't it? Since when do the rich wail? Well James describes a coming time when all their wealth would be destroyed, v2 it has rotted, perhaps referring to their wealth in food, got moth eaten, referring to their wealth in clothing and corroded, referring to their wealth in gold. The point is that ultimately all their wealth will be destroyed. It will gain them nothing and they will not find it a security. The odd phrase "will eat up your flesh like fire" is just a way of saying that wealth has them in its grip and ultimately it will be no security. Yes I know we need a pension but the thinking of these rich people has been focussed solely on wealth and God has not had a look in. In my Bible reading notes this week was this phrase "we will either love God and give away money or love money and give away God". Now that is a bit trite and simplistic but James here is doing what he has been throughout this letter and asking the readers not to be double-minded. Not to think they can live by following God a bit and also by following their human wisdom a bit. That way James has been saying is disaster like the man with a foot on the bank and a foot in the boat. It is a very unstable position. The readers

and indeed you and I may look at rich people and think wow they have got it all but James tells us not to because eventually all wealth will be destroyed and as he shows in v4-6 ultimately wealth corrupts people. Jesus was very clear about this when he said in the sermon on the Mount "Don't store up for yourselves treasures on earth....but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven....for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt 6:19-21)

As we have been seeing through James it is a matter of the heart and our hearts being open to and set upon God.

It has been great to hear the testimonies of Ewa, Sylwester and Jon and to hear what God has been doing in their lives and why they have come to this point of baptism. What has happened to them is that God has caused as it were a U-turn in their thinking and acting. He has turned them from following their own way of life according to their own thinking to following Jesus and in every situation asking what would God have me do now? That is what God wants for all of us, for the person who is here this morning perhaps as a visitor or guest. God wants you to have a change of heart and mind to see that all the things of this world, nice, pleasurable and good as they may often be are no lasting security and for us to find our security in Christ Jesus.

2. Take the long term view v7-12

However of course this may not help in the short term because a. the rich do seem to have fun and b. they do seem to have power. But James encourages his readers then and now to take the long term view. That is to recognise that this world is not all there is and that the pains and injustices of this world are not the sum total of life. He encouraged them to look to that day when the Lord Jesus Christ will return and receive his followers into his glory and establish his perfect rule. Until then James encourages the followers of Christ to have patience as we wait for that day and perseverance as we continue through life, through troubles, pains and persecutions.

A couple of weekends ago I saw a gardener go to work. He got the bits he needed. Prepared the soil and sowed the seeds. The next day as we loaded him and the pots into the car to take back to his mother, my grandson was eagerly looking to see the flowers and disappointed that that had not yet grown. But we know it doesn't happen like that! We know from watching the farmer that it takes time to grow the crops and then in our own lives, for you Ewa, Sylwester and Jon and for all of us, the fruit of God's spirit doesn't grow in us overnight. Some of you who have come as friends to support these who are being baptised may in a couple of years time be disappointed as you think well they haven't made much progress in the Christian life. Yes we will water them this morning but growth takes time and we need to be patient. We also need to persevere.

I was very disappointed the other day because, while I have been pretty busy over the last few years, I thought that 2016 in Rio de Janeiro I could be ready to take my place in the windsurfing team.

However it has been dropped for that Olympics so I have missed my chance – hence my disappointment.

Actually I have only ever tried windsurfing once. I managed to stand up on the board but couldn't get the sail up and when I did get the sail up I fell off the board. But it does strike me that wind surfing is a great example of this perseverance James is talking about here. You get going and then fall off and then get back on the board and then fall off again and then get back on the board. Isn't that a bit like being a Christian? We are going along with Jesus OK then we mess up we do something wrong. So we come back to God and say sorry and start off again. It needs perseverance because we are not perfect and we will do things wrong and we will wonder if we are growing at all. And sometimes life will be tough and there will be real problems and suffering and we will wonder if it is all worth it. James here uses the example of Job. A couple of years ago we spent the summer period looking at Job and the disasters that came on him and his family and saw how he still trusted God. We need that same patient perseverance because sometimes life sucks. So we need the long term perspective that James offers here to help us to look to the day when Christ will return and to wait patiently for that day.

So can you do that? Can you take the long term view and not expect everything to change to day, not expect your life to turn around immediately, not expect to be perfect as soon as you come up out of the water, not expect every day to go perfectly, as the Tour de France riders found out this week occasionally there are tacks on the road. Can you take the long term view and persevere with Jesus?

3. In the meantime... v13-20

Recognising as he does that the Christian life is not easy as we wait for the return of Jesus, James helps these Christians to see how they can keep going and the key to keeping going James suggests is prayer. V13, "Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray", v14 "any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him", v16 "pray for each other". Why is this so, because v16b "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective". Prayer is powerful and prayer works. I don't have time here to go into the details of prayer and illness I just want us to see that point that James is presenting. He knows that as Christians live in these days awaiting the return of Jesus life will be tough. It was for these first readers who we saw in 1:2 "you face trials of many kinds" and it is in ours as we know only too well. But we have the powerful weapon of prayer.

Life was tough for the prophet Elijah as he opposed the evil rule of King Ahab and his wife Jezebel but in answer to his prayer God held back the rain for three and half years as a sign of who ruled in Israel. As James sums up in v16b "The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective". That is the prayer of someone who is in a right relationship with God the Father is powerful because prayer

opens up situations to God's power and especially those times when things are tough and the storms of life crash over us.

In prayer we bring the pains of life, the worries of life, the troubles of life as well hopefully as the joys of life to a God who is sovereign and who is able to act on our behalf. In prayer as God's children we come to him our father who knows us and loves us and is able to answer all our prayers.

He is not going to answer them all as we might wish. He is not always going to take away the pains, heal the wounds or solve the problems but his is always faithful, he does always provide "strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow" and he is always able to hold and keep us through the worst of life's storms. Prayer is the key James says to Christian survival. So Jon shame on you for praying for Arsenal to win at football when they are much bigger things to pray for like Kettering! But seriously God gives us prayer as the means to help us continue following Jesus when things get tough. Here is our true security and it is to be found in God not in any of the things we have around us. The point James makes and is important for us today and especially for the three friends being baptised is that in the troubles and pains of life God encourages us to pray and to know that he will hear and answer our prayer. Through prayer he will strengthen us for when the path is tough.

Through prayer he will keep us going when our inclination is to give up and through prayer he will guard and protect us along the way. He is our heavenly Father. He has as it were a vested interest in us as his children. God has begun his work in you as he had with the original readers of this letter and so, as Paul reminded the Christians in Philippi, we can be "confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:6)

So do not neglect prayer. As someone once said "seven days without prayer makes one weak". Be people of prayer continually coming into the presence of the heavenly Father bringing to him your fears and joys, your concerns and thanks, your pains and happinesses. Don't think you can get through a day without God but daily come to him and ask for his help and strength for that day.

How do we live as followers of Jesus? Firstly by making sure our hearts are right with God and that he is God in our lives and that we are looking to him not the things around us as our security.

Secondly be patient and persevering as you follow Jesus because following him is not always going to be easy and thirdly rely on prayer because prayer is powerful and effective.