

Rich Nathan  
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Growing Into Maturity  
James 5:1-11

## **Start Looking Ahead**

As many of you know, we have been doing a series from the book of James over the last number of weeks. The book of James, as we have discovered, is designed to create spiritual maturity in believers. James' concern is that we grow up as Christians. That we grow deep and that our roots go down far. It is not enough for James that the church gets larger or that we have more bodies in the room. James is concerned about what kind of people we are and what we are producing in our lives.

This week, James tells us that an important part of spiritual maturity is looking ahead to the future. His message to us is to start looking ahead. That is really an essential ingredient for discussing maturity at all. One of the ways that we would characterize someone who is immature is that they never look ahead. They don't think about the consequences of their actions. Everything is the next five minutes. Immediate gratification. How I feel in the moment. Measured just on this basis, on whether we regularly look ahead and think through the long-term implications of our actions or whether we are focused just on the moment, the right now, on how we feel just this second, just on this criteria alone, we would say that America in the 90's is an incredibly immature society.

Is this not the case? That what we have created is a culture of immature people, of babies? You could almost summarize the problems in this country as being dominated by extremely short-term thinking. On a political level, our entire government is characterized

by extremely short-term thinking. We are headed for a major budgetary train wreck in the next ten years regarding Medicare and social security. All of the numbers point out that Medicare is going to be bankrupt in seven years. It will. By the year 2010, I just saw a chart on it and it was quite frightening, in fourteen years, at the current growth of federal revenues, our entire national budget will be eaten up by entitlement programs and interest on the national debt. There will be no money at all for what is now labeled discretionary programs. Do you know what the government calls discretionary programs? Discretionary, frivolous, luxury items like the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, national defense, road construction, education, crime, and pollution control – you know, frivolous stuff. At the current rate of the growth of the entitlement programs and interest, we will have no money at all for any of these discretionary programs. Social Security? How many of you are counting on social security in your retirement as the way that you are going to spend your golden years?

Corporations function by extremely short-term thinking. Managers are evaluated on short-term results. Turning companies around in a year over against long-term planning.

The way we spend and save. Talk about immediate gratification. We in the U.S. have the lowest savings rate of any country in the western world. We save less of our incomes and our costs are less. Things cost much less here than they do in virtually any other western country. And yet, we save less and run up more debt than any other western country.

It is of particular concern to me as I think about the future of our ability to finance the kingdom of God. I talk with so many folks in their 20's who have a heart to do ministry, feel strongly led to give their lives to pastoring or world missions, and yet because they have been trained in short-term thinking, they are all ready under a pile of debt. And it is going to

take 10-15 years to work themselves out of a debt hole, which inhibits their liberty and their ability to be free to go where God wants them to go and do what God wants them to do.

Short-term thinking? Just watch people raising their children. I watch folks being pushed around by their 3 and 5 year olds. There is no real control over a small child. The child is just indulged and loved on. That is part of the game. But folks, those of you who have young children, you are just getting started, can I give you some advice from a father of teenagers? It is easier when the kids are younger to give in and not fight about bedtime. You have a stubborn preschooler who doesn't want to go to bed on time or doesn't want to eat their vegetables or argues with you about buying candy in the grocery store. Back and forth. I gotta have it. I gotta have it. I gotta have it. They don't want to sleep in their own bed. I know that it is easier to give in than to fight, especially when your child is strong-willed. But I am telling you, Marlene and I have talked about this almost since we have had kids, if you can't control a three year old, there is no way you are going to control your 13 year old. If your six year old is running over you, think about what they are going to be like when they are 16 year olds. It is too late then. You have a big 16-17 year old who doesn't respect you, who won't listen to you, there is not a whole lot you can do at that point. So bite the bullet now, young parents. Get a hold of your kids now and in the moment, say to your self, "This is all going to pay off. Because if I can make my kid respect me when they are young, hopefully they will respect me later on."

Churches are just as guilty in thinking short-term. Most churches play a maintaining game.

"Well, as long as we can keep everyone in the church happy right now..."

"As long as all the political factions, or however the church is run or balanced out, and there are no complaints, well then we have had a good year."

But in so many churches there is no real investment in the future, no real development of future leaders, no building of infrastructure that would carry us over the next several decades. The Lord spoke to me very clearly about four years ago as I was seeing this mass of people coming into this church and the shortage of leaders. I was praying about it. The Lord spoke to me and said, “Well, you are not going to be able to reap where you haven’t sown. If you don’t invest heavily in developing future leaders, you aren’t going to have any future leaders.”

Many times churches rely on leaders who have grown up elsewhere in some other system. They are imported into the church. That is not a good long-term plan. So, based on this principle of being able to reap only where we have sown, we started the Vineyard Leadership Institute here to train people in biblical thinking, and to train people in ministry skills. This church is investing a lot of money and time in an area that we are not going to see a lot of present benefits. But I will tell you something; it is going to pay off over the decades. We are going to have hundreds, and hundreds and hundreds of young people who are grounded in the word, who know how to pray for the sick, who know how to lead other people, who know how to counsel and cast out demons, and feed the poor.

Most people look at this issue of looking ahead from a slightly different angle. Most people don’t stop running the machine long enough to consider what they are producing. In Stephen Covey’s best selling book, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, he uses the illustration of climbing a ladder. He says that most folks spend their lives climbing and climbing a ladder. Then they hit their 50’s and discover that the ladder has been leaning on the wrong wall. That all of their ambition and all of their time and energy has gone into producing something that is ultimately unsatisfying, ultimately empty. They have given their adult life

to the company and the company turns around and hands them a pink slip. They have already lost their families. The kids are barely speaking to them.

Looking at the issue of short-term thinking from a different angle, we have to stop running the machine, stop climbing the ladder long enough to ask ourselves the longer-term question: What is it that we want to produce? What is it that we want to produce?

Parents, take ten seconds here and ask yourself what is it that you want to produce in the midst of all of your feeding of your children and clothing your children and talking with your children and fighting with your children. What is it that you want to produce? I know for Marlene and me what we want to produce in our children is we want them to become mature Christians. Through all the twists and turns of their childhood, at the end of the day what we want to produce is mature Christians. I want to have two kids who love the Lord, who serve him faithfully, who give to the church that they go to, that tithing is never an issue in their lives. They learned that from the time they began making money. Marlene and I have taught the kids from the time they were five years old you get a check, you get a gift, you give 10% to the church. We want them to respect God's word. We want them to respect authority. We want them to learn how to work hard. To be open to the voice of God regarding what God wants for their careers and for their love lives. Parents, what do you want for your children?

As pastor here, I frequently have to step back from running the machine, climbing the ladder, and say what kind of church do we want to produce? When it is all done, when I am old, and when people start saying, "You know, I remember a time when Rich actually made sense up there. You could follow his train of thought. Now, I don't know. But he used to be pretty good." You know, before *that* time, before I am done, I want to have produced a church in which people think and live biblically. That the soil that they draw

their life from, the questions that they ask are from the soil of the Bible. I want to produce people who are not flighty. They are not taken in by every spiritual flim flam artist. But people who are deep, who are balanced, who are wise. I want to have people who give sacrificially money and time without begrudging every dollar and every minute. They just give to the Lord because that is their understanding of Christianity. I want to produce people who can't think of themselves without thinking of sharing their faith. That is just who they are. I want to produce people who are regularly praying for the sick. People who resolve conflicts in a biblical way. They forgive and let things go. They confront when there is a need to confront. They keep short accounts. I want to produce people who have good marriages and a good plan for their families.

I think about this regularly. What is it that we are becoming? I want to produce a great church filled with great people who serve a great God.

Let me give you a little illustration here. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century a Swedish chemist named Alfred Nobel woke one morning to read his own obituary in a local Swedish newspaper. It said, "Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, died yesterday. He devised a way for more people to be killed in a war than ever before and he died a very rich man." Actually, it was Alfred's older brother who had died, but the newspaper reporter had bungled his epitaph. Nevertheless, this obituary had a profound effect on Nobel. He decided that he wanted to be known and he wanted a legacy for more than developing the means to kill people more efficiently or amassing more fortune. So he created the Nobel Prize for scientists and writers and politicians who ultimately improved the world. Now, when people hear the name "Nobel," they think of doing good for humanity.

The point is that there are very few things that will change us as much as looking at our lives as though they were finished and being able to evaluate the results. James' point in

today's text is that if you want to become mature, start looking ahead. Last week we said that if you want to become mature, stop playing God. Today's lesson is "Start Looking Ahead." Let's pray.

James 5:1-11

*"Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten our clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you. 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."*

As we look at this first section, vv. 1-6, it is pretty plain that James is not talking to Christian believers as he confronts and condemns the wealthy. There is no hope held out for these folks. They are not called "brothers." There is a contrast between v. 1 and v.7. Look here, so that we understand how to read and interpret scripture regarding who the audience is.

In v. 1, “Now listen you rich people, weep and wail...” and then v. 7 shifts, “Be patient, then, brothers...” James simply says this is the fate that awaits you. It is disaster, doom, judgment.

Why on your outlines did I say “the blessing of the coming judgment?” Where is the blessing in an announcement of doom and disaster?

I looked at five or six commentaries in preparing this message. None of them point out that in every judgment passage in the Bible, there is an implicit hope held out for people, an implicit, “But if you repent, God will relent.” I know the passage itself doesn’t hold out hope, but you must read the texts of the Bible in the context of the whole scripture and implicit in every judgment passage in the Bible, everyone of those prophetic doom, brimstone and fire passages, they say, “but...if you turn, if you repent, there is hope held out for you.

I think the classic illustration of this is in Jonah 3. In Jonah 3 God sends the prophet, Jonah, to the unbelieving nation of Nineveh to declare a message. The message is simply this: Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned. In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed.

No hope held out. No opportunities offered, and yet, because of the mercy and compassion of God, when the Ninevites heard the message and repented, when the Ninevites heard the heart beat of God in the midst of the message, and they stopped their violence. God relented and did not destroy the city.

You see in Jonah 3 that the king who called upon his countrymen to repent understood that the message of doom came from a God who is filled with compassion. The king said, “Who knows God may yet relent and with his compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we may not perish.”



You see the same thing, by the way, in the announcement of judgment to Manasseh. Those of you who are taking notes, may want to look up 2 Chronicles 33 in your spare time. There is an announcement of judgment to King Manasseh, no call to repent in it; just judgment is going to come. Manasseh knows the heartbeat of God that every announcement of judgment comes from a compassionate God. He repents and God relents.

Here is the point for you. You have the power to rewrite your future. As you look ahead and you don't like what you see, you don't like what you see spiritually, you don't like the person you are becoming, you don't like what you see martially, you don't like what is happening in your marriage, you don't like where you are headed, you don't like what is happening in your relationships—write this down: You have the power to rewrite your future. It doesn't matter what kind of sword is hanging over your head. You may have received the judgment of cancer, by the proclamation of doctors. You may spend however much time God gives you whether he heals you or not, you spend the next period of your life serving the Lord, forgiving people who have hurt you, sowing into people love—you have the power to rewrite your future.

You have blown it. You have totally screwed up. And haven't we all? You blew it in your marriage and had an affair. You blew it with your kids. Sure, there are some consequences. You can't determine how someone else is going to respond to you. But you can rewrite your part; you can rewrite your future.

One of my favorite verses in the Bible, when I think about the God that I serve, is 2 Samuel 14:14. I want you to turn to this because I would like every one of you to underline this verse in your Bible and get this Bible in your guts in terms of who God is as you look ahead. 2 Samuel 14:14 says this: *"Like water spilled on the ground which cannot be recovered, so we*

*must die. But God does not take away life; instead, he devises ways so that a banished person may not remain estranged from him.”*

Sure, there are natural consequences. We all must die. But our God is continually plotting and planning a way for a relationship with him to be restored. There is always implicit hope held out for you. If you turn back he will receive you. You don't like what you see ahead? Then change the ending.

Let me ask a different question. You may say, “Rich, why are these judgment passages in the Bible anyway? Especially if this is directed toward non-believers who are not in the church? Why does the Bible spend so much time addressing the fate of those outside? If you look back in those long prophetic books and some of them spend six or seven or ten chapters talking about the fate of this or that nation. Why is that?”

You know, there is an encouragement to believers as they meditate on and look ahead to God's coming judgment on oppressors. There is an encouragement.

I have mentioned several times of having recently completed Nelson Mandela's long autobiography. Just a great book. And maybe I can explain why coming judgment would be an encouragement. It is an encouragement if you are oppressed; to see that God is going to do something on your behalf. In Mandela's case, South Africa was living under strict racial segregation laws that many of you are certainly aware of. It was called Apartheid. For 50 years, actually longer, it was enshrined in law. If you were a black man, you saw all of the wealth of your country controlled by another race. No matter what you did, no matter how hard you worked, no matter how smart you were, no matter how good a person you were, in South Africa you had no hope of ever escaping poverty, period. You just looked forward to a life of grinding poverty. If you went to work for a white person, just like James talks about here, they could withhold your wages and you had no legal redress. You couldn't sue them

because you had no legal standing in white courts. You couldn't give testimony. Your evidence was considered worthless in a white court. Every night after you worked for a white man, you would go home to an impoverished community with sewage running through the streets. Your kids had no shoes. You heard them up at night crying because they were hungry. They were malnourished. They were poorly educated. You had no access to good modern medical care.

And then maybe you would go to work for a wealthy white man in one of his garden parties with all of his white friends. At the end of the party, you would watch people throw out food enough to feed your entire clan. Just dumping food and wasting hundreds of dollars of money. Would you not be encouraged, friends, just living in a system that held out no hope for you if someone came along and said, "One day this injustice will end. One day your kids are going to eat. One day there is going to be hope. One day the oppressors will be thrown off of your back."

You remember that the whole book of James is a call to perseverance in trial. James is saying as you look ahead, whatever pain you are in, it won't last forever. These folks who are partying now, it is just about to strike midnight. Their little chariots will turn back to pumpkins and their horses will turn into mice.

You read those judgment passages in the Bible. On the one hand we can't ever be happy or encouraged by someone else's downfall. We always find ourselves feeling sorry for folks as they party on the Titanic. There is always a part of us that says with Jesus we have to weep over the city of Jerusalem as we see the coming judgment. Jesus looked out on the city, he saw the judgment coming, he said, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I would have gathered you under my wings like a hen gathers her chicks, but you would not." There is

always going to be a part of our hearts, as we consider what is coming ahead that will be sorrowful.

There is another part of our hearts, very appropriately, that praises God for balancing the scales. Finally, someone is going to intervene and bring justice. Someone is going to deal with the genocide around the world and the folks who cause millions of people to be uprooted from their homes in Rwanda, last year in Bosnia, the year before in Somalia, the year before that in another country. Christian people always rejoice with God at the prospect of him coming to judge the earth.

Revelation 18:19 speaks of the overthrow of the city of Babylon and the final judgment of God. It says, "*Woe, O great city, where all who had ships on the sea became rich through your wealth. In one hour she was brought to ruin.*" There is an overthrow of this trading nation, this wealthy place.

What is the reaction of Christian people? The angel of God cries out to them, "Rejoice over her, O heaven, rejoice saints and apostles and prophets. God has judged her for the way she treated you."

We have to get this side of the truth into our spirits. We rejoice and say, "Yes, finally justice. Finally our prayers have been heard. Finally we have been paid attention to. Finally the blood of the unborn and the abused children and the abuse of women, finally someone has come along and rescued them and dealt with it. It is a good thing when we see God intervene.

So we look ahead and we say certain things to ourselves. We say, "Hey, I can rewrite my future. And there is coming a day when the injustice will stop and the pain will stop, when the scales will be rebalanced and wrong will be righted."

What is the basis of God's coming judgment? James tells us in vv. 1-6 why God is coming to judge. He is going to judge people based on how they are investing their lives and their wealth. Verses 1-3: *"Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you. Your wealth has rotted, moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire."*

In James' day, a way to sum up wealth was to talk about it in terms of gold and silver and clothing. God is not opposed to wealth. God is not jealous of anyone. He is not envious. He is not covetous. He doesn't need our stuff. But God wants to know what you are doing with what he has given you. How you are investing your life and your wealth. Here the condemnation is of hoarding, storing up what others can use. Isn't it a great crime that we store up massive amounts of clothing that we never wear? Dishes we never use, bicycles we never ride, and books we never read? For what? So they can just rot? So they can be turned into rags?

James says, "What is the point of all your hoarding? To feed moths? Moths have eaten your clothes. To feed rust? Your gold and silver are corroded."

Let me issue a challenge and one that I will be the first person to accept. Folks, what if each one of us who are part of the church made a decision to go through our closets, to go through our drawers, to go through our garages, to go through our basements, and give away everything that we haven't used for the last two years. Friends, if you haven't worn an item of clothing in the last two years, you aren't going to wear it.

What if we, in the church, said, "We will make a Thanksgiving offering to God of all that we don't use." Of all that isn't just broken and ripped, but we go through our stuff and say, "Here are suits that I never wear. I am not going to wear them. Here are coats that we don't wear. Here is furniture that we don't use. Here are bicycles that we don't ride." We

gather up our stuff over the next couple of weeks and gave it away to the Salvation Army or to Goodwill. And we got a little leaner before Thanksgiving.

James says that as you look out on the future, give away your stuff or use it. Don't hoard it.

How many of you right now can say, "Rich, over the next couple of weeks, we will clean stuff out and give it away. Our house needs to be cleaned anyway." Well, let's commit to that. It is a basis for judgment of where our investment is going. Is it going to moths or is it going to the poor?

God judges the world because of its insensitivity. It says, "You have hoarded wealth in the last days. And weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you." You know, one of the things that occur when you start hoarding stuff is that it creates a dullness to what is coming down the pike. With Thanksgiving coming, you know how you feel after you have eaten an enormous meal? You have just polished off the third plate of turkey and then the pies come out. I feel like a fat old bear that just wants to hibernate for winter after I have eaten 12 pounds of food. Your eyes get heavy and you feel lethargic. That is the problem of not getting lean. Not having an open hand and giving stuff away. You get tired, you get dull, and you are not sharp to the voice of the Lord at what is coming down the pike.

I don't know how many of you are familiar with the volcano at Mt. Vesuvius in 79 AD that destroyed the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum. The destruction was so swift. I saw pictures in the National Geographic. The destruction was so swift that people were killed while they were just going about their routine. Men and women were killed in their places by the exploding ash and lava as they stood in the marketplace. People were buried in their bathtubs. Slaves were buried as they were working in the fields. They were caught in the position of digging. Even family pets were buried as they were standing.

The sad part is that none of the people at Pompeii or Herculaneum had to die. Historians record that there were weeks of rumblings at the mountains and smoke that was clearly visible days before the explosion. People simply didn't respond to Vesuvius' warnings.

That is what happens, as we get wealthier and wealthier and more and more apathetic and more indifferent. We lose our sensitivity to the rumblings of judgment. James is coming along saying, "Wake up. See what is coming down the pike." People will be judged because of their insensitivity.

Folks will be judged for their injustice. "Look at the wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty." Verse 6: *"You have condemned and murdered innocent men who are not oppressing you."*

In those days, hired laborers were used. They were usually the younger sons of peasant farmers. They were forced off the land. These poor sharecroppers, if you will, lived a hand to mouth existence. Today's pay led to tomorrow's breakfast. If a wealthy person held back in the evening in paying wages, these poor folks' families didn't eat the next day. The wealthy always had lots of reasons for holding back and keeping the money themselves. Maybe to tie the person to their contract, making sure they didn't leave. They may have used the money elsewhere for a little while. Make a little more money. The wealthy abused the legal system.

Why does God judge? Because we make the wrong investments. We hoard up instead of give away because we are insensitive to his voice. We become dull. He speaks and speaks and speaks. But we shut it out because there is injustice. God hates injustice.

You say, "Rich, where am I unjust? Where am I unfair?"

Well, you know, when you think about injustice, you have to think about power. All of us have power. Husbands and wives have financial power with each other, relational power, emotional power, sexual power. Employers have power with their employees. Parents have power over children. Older siblings have power over younger siblings. Church leaders have power over people in their congregations. All of us have power.

God wants to ask us a personal question. “Is there any place that you are abusing your power? Is there anyone with whom you misuse the power that has been given you?”

Spouses, do you misuse your power with your spouse? Do you withhold affection? That is an abuse of power. Withhold compliments? Withhold affirmation? Withhold money?

Folks who owe people money, do you withhold what you owe? That is unjust. Do you know how many folks I have talked to that have told me that they get so tired of dealing with Christians because Christians don’t pay their bills? I have physicians tell me that. I have had dentists tell me that. I have had counselors tell me that. I have had car repairmen tell me that. It is unjust; it is an abuse of your power to fail to pay what you owe. Don’t hold back. If you can’t afford to pay the whole bill, write a note and say, “I would like to make payments of such and such” and you stop spending money on other things so that you can pay what you owe.

Employers, are you treating your employees fairly? Some employees are berated, some employees are screamed at. Folks are put down. Kids are dominated. God will judge injustice, which is mainly an abuse of power.

There is great hope held out for those who are being abused. God hears their cries. God hears their cries. He hears the cry of every abused wife. He hears the prayers of every



person who is being short-changed in business. Every person who is being victimized in families, or at school or in friendships. The one who is going to judge hears people's cries.

And he judges people because of their sinful indulgence. Verse 5: *"You have lived on the earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter."* The word "luxury" literally means soft comfort. There is no self-denial. There is no leanness. People who go beyond pleasure to vice. Everything in their lives is soft. Stomachs are soft. Couches are soft. It is all designed for pleasure.

Ultimately, of course, when we give ourselves to pleasure it is both unsatisfying and addictive. So, the Lord comes and says, "If you want to feed yourself, you become the fattened calf." And he judges.

Friends, there is a hard edge to our God. Now is the time to make things right with the Lord. Now is the time to deal with our insensitivity, our hoarding. This is the day to rewrite the future. But there is a hard edge to our God. When the Lord returns, the books will be closed. We want to look ahead toward that Day of Judgment.

From vv. 7-11, James radically changes his tone from one of condemnation to one of a coach. As he speaks to the church primarily now and says, "Keep your eyes fixed on the goal as you look ahead." I see James functioning now as a coach on the sidelines. Or a fan standing on the sidelines during a marathon saying, "You can do it! Keep going, just a little bit longer! Don't quit now! You are going to make it! One more mile! Don't give up! Don't give into despair! I know things are hard, but the Lord's coming is ahead. The Lord is coming back." Verse 7: *"Be patient then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crops and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains."*

Especially in the New Testament, when Christians were really paying for their Christianity, some of them paid with their lives. We see that the Lord's coming is dear to

Christians. One writer found over 300 references to the Lord's coming in the New Testament. He said that one out of every 13 verses in the New Testament from Matthew to Revelation is devoted to the Lord's return. The Lord's coming is dear. It is cherished. It is celebrated by New Testament Christians. In 2 Timothy 4:8 Paul speaks of the reward that is awaiting him and he says, *"Not only for me, but for all those who long for his appearance."*

As part of your looking ahead, maturing Christian, is the Lord's coming dear to you? Do you meditate on it? Do you cherish it in your heart? Do you say, "Things may be really tough for us now and I am going through this relational conflict and I am ill. The potter has me on the wheel. But when I think of what is ahead, I can fill my heart with joy because the Lord is coming."

The Bible says that the Lord's coming is going to be preceded by signs on the earth. There are going to be physical signs. There is going to be an increase in natural disasters. The birth pangs are going to get faster and faster. There is going to be an increase in wars and disasters on the earth. Famines and hunger. There is going to be a great sign of the gospel being preached to all nations. Matthew 24:13, *"This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations and then the end will come."*

We get to participate in the coming of the end as we send missionaries out. It is a sign of the Lord's return.

His coming will be unmistakable. He is not coming back secretly, mysteriously. His coming will be visible. It will be like lightening flashing from the east to the west in the sky. No one will miss it. It doesn't matter if you are atheist or Buddhist. Everyone will see the return of Jesus Christ.

His coming will be at a day and an hour that no one will be able to predict in advance. His coming will cause his people, who have received him into their hearts, to rise

up in the air. To be transformed into unblemished holiness. His coming will bring judgment to his foes.

Why is the coming of the Lord so dear to Christians? Because we finally get free from all the things that rob our joy. All the aches and pains in our bodies. All the arthritis. All the back problems. All the heart problems. All the immunological problems. All the migraines. All the blindness. We are finally free from all of our addictions. All of the things we hate about ourselves, all of the things that cause us at the end of the day to say, “O God, O God, will this ever change? Will I ever be different? Will I ever get mastery over my temper? Over my stupid tongue?

The Lord’s coming is dear because we finally get his presence. The Bible compares the Lord’s coming to a wedding day. The Bible calls us the bride. It calls Jesus the Bridegroom. It says that his coming will be like a wedding day. If you have ever seen a bride before her marriage, she spends a lot of time thinking about that wedding day. Planning for it. Anticipating it. Looking forward to it. Fearing it. Preparing for it. Fixing themselves up. Not a lot of brides go down the aisle with stuff they just got at the thrift store. It is tempting for other days, but not for wedding days.

I remember as a young groom standing at the front of the hall waiting for Marlene to come down the aisle. Anticipating. Looking forward to my bride. And after a few large guys found her in the parking lot about to drive off and dragged her back in...No...I am just kidding. Boy, I anticipated her walking down that aisle. The only thing I could think as I saw her coming toward me was “Praise the Lord.” I remember I was transported into a different zone. The presence of God was on me as I saw my bride coming and all that I could think was, “Praise the Lord.”

The Lord's coming is dear to believers. The Lord's coming is near to us. Verse 8: *"You can be patient and stand firm because the Lord's coming is near."* Verse 9: *"The judge is standing at the door."*

If you look ahead, you need to understand that the Lord may come very, very soon. That there may not be a lot of time left for getting it together, for fixing ourselves up for the bridegroom. How could James who spoke 20 centuries ago say that the Lord is near? How can we still say that today?

Let me give you a little illustration. Catholic Cardinal, John Henry Newman, for whom all the Newman Centers all over college campuses are named. Newman once described time as being like a river flowing right by the edge of a cliff. He said to imagine a river flowing along the edge of a cliff, maybe five feet away from the edge. That river can flow over the edge of the cliff for miles. It is so near to the edge. And then at a certain point, it can just break and flow over the cliff like a great waterfall.

For the last 2000 years, time has been flowing along the edge, so near. And in a moment, it is just going to break and Jesus will return. We don't know exactly when the river is going to make a turn. It could be in the next few feet. It could be in the next few months. The next few years. The Lord's coming is near.

And the Lord's coming is feared. Verse 9: *"Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door."*

The coming bridegroom who is dear to us, the coming Lord who is near to us is also the coming Judge who will be feared by us. James is saying under pressure there is always the great temptation to hurt others, lash out at people. He says, "Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged."

You know what it is like under pressure. The classic man comes home from being screamed at by his boss. He kicks the dog and screams at his kids. James says that as you look ahead, you need to look ahead to the fact that you as a believer will be judged by God. One of the things that has almost been eliminated from Christian consciousness is the biblical truth that every Christian will stand before God in judgment. You need to regularly think about, as you look ahead and want to grow into maturity, the Day of Judgment.

Oh, this or that indulgence may be fine right now, but what is it going to look like when you stand before the Lord? When Jesus returns we are all going to stand before the judgment seat. If you have trusted in him for salvation, if you have trusted in Christ personally for salvation what is going to be in question is not your salvation. What is going to be in question is your reward.

Paul insists that the Christian who makes the poorest showing before God, whose works will not stand up before scrutiny, will be saved, but the fire of judgment will destroy their works and determine forever their place, position in the kingdom of God. The fire of God's judgment will not touch us, we are saved from judgment, but it will pass over all that we have done. It will search out our motives. It will look over our lives.

Friends, every one of us has been given by God a sacred trust. Every one of you has been given gifts. You have been given opportunities. You have been given money. You have been given time. You have been given family. The Lord will stand you up before him one day and ask you: "What have you done with all that has been given to you? With all the opportunities you have had to give, to show kindness, to share the gospel, with all of your smarts, with all the teaching you have received? You are in a great church, what have you done with all that has been given you?"

Jesus says in Luke 12:48, *“From everyone who has been given much, much more will be demanded. From the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.”*

We, Christians, look ahead to the Lord’s coming, to our bridegroom. We look ahead to a coming judgment. And finally, we look ahead to suffering and blessing. “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.”

We learned at the beginning of this book that being faithful to the Lord does not guarantee immunity from suffering. In fact, often faithfulness to God will bring us into suffering. We will be disliked. We will be misunderstood by co-workers, by parents, by roommates. Sometimes faithfulness to the Lord brings about suffering. It certainly doesn’t form a bubble over us.

As an example of patience in the face of suffering and perseverance, of people who have kept on going, James calls our attention to the prophets. Jeremiah was thrown into prison. Ezekiel was widowed. He suffered the loss of his wife out of faithfulness to God. Hosea had to suffer an adulterous wife out of faithfulness to God. Isaiah suffered the loss of his life. Jewish tradition says that he was sawed in two from faithfulness to God.

We can look forward to a measure of difficulty, suffering. But we can also look forward to great blessing. Verse 11: *“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.”*

You know what we can look ahead to? What Job got after a life of perseverance? What Job got was more than a lot of stuff. Stuff was good. The return of his wealth was

good. The return of his house was good. The birth of children was good. But you know what Job got at the end of a life of perseverance? He got an intimate knowledge of God. He got the presence of the Lord.

I want to finish with Job 42:5. Job says at the end of his life of trials and difficulties, “My ears had heard of you. But now my eyes have seen you.” Friends, as you look ahead, do you not long for and anticipate, hunger for, a deeper fuller knowledge of God. Yeah, I heard about you, God, but now I see you and now I know you. Oh, I want that in my life. And I pray that as you look at him, you will want that in your life.