Eschatology and Christian Living

Think about the last time you knew someone important was on their way. A parent heading home earlier than expected. A manager walking back into the office. A guest arriving in an hour when you haven't quite finished getting the house together. Something shifts, doesn't it? Not out of fear, necessarily. Just out of awareness. The arrival is real. It's coming. And that changes the temperature of everything you're doing right now.

James writes his entire letter in that kind of moment.

Welcome back to the series. I'm Ethan, and today we're going into some territory that can feel a little abstract at first, but I want to show you that it is anything but.

We're talking about eschatology, which sounds like a word you'd only hear in a seminary classroom. But what it actually means is this: where is all of this going? What is the end of the story? And more importantly, how does knowing that change the way you live right now?

That's the question James is pressing on in chapter five. And the answer he gives is more practical than most people expect.

Let me start with a word about what eschatology is, and what it isn't.

There are two ways most people approach end-times thinking.

The first group is obsessed with it. Timelines, charts, sequences of events, specific interpretations of prophecy. There's an entire industry built around this.

The second group has basically tuned out. They've heard enough confusing, conflicting teaching on the subject that they've filed it under "not my concern" and moved on. I understand both responses.

James does neither.

James doesn't give us a timeline, and he doesn't let us ignore the subject either. What he does is ground the whole question in something much simpler: the Lord is coming. That arrival is certain. And because it's certain, it shapes how you live in the meantime.

So eschatology, in James, is not the subject of the letter. It's the context of the letter. It's the air that everything else in the book is breathing.

Keep that in mind, because once you see it, you start to notice it everywhere.

The strongest eschatological passage in James is chapter five, verses seven through eleven. Let me read it.

> "Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful." James 5:7-11.

That's a dense passage. Let's walk through it slowly.

The first thing James reaches for is the image of a farmer. Not a landowner, not an overseer. A small farmer in Palestine. Someone whose entire livelihood, and his family's survival, depends on whether the harvest comes in. He plants his seed, he waits, and then he waits some more. The early rains in October and November get things started. The late rains in March and April bring the crop home. The farmer has no control over either. He can't summon the rain. He can't accelerate the season. What he can do is tend what's been planted, hold his nerve, and trust that what has always come will come again. James says: that is what you look like when you actually believe the Lord is coming.

This is an important distinction. James is not describing a grim, teeth-gritting endurance. He's describing someone who is actively waiting, tending, leaning forward toward a harvest they are certain is real. The farmer doesn't give up. He doesn't abandon the field in frustration. And he doesn't rage at the sky. He keeps farming.

But there's something else going on in this passage that we need to grapple with.

James is writing to people who are suffering. Not mildly inconvenienced. Suffering. If you go back just a few verses to the beginning of chapter five, James has already fired a warning at the wealthy oppressors of his community. He says the wages of the labourers who mowed the fields have been held back by

fraud. He says the righteous person has been condemned and murdered without resistance. These are not small grievances. These are real injustices happening to real people.

So when James calls for patience in 5:7, he is not being dismissive. He's not saying, "don't worry about it." He's saying something more like: put the weight of justice into someone else's hands. Someone better equipped to carry it. Wait for God to act rather than forcing the outcome yourself.

That word James uses, makrothymia, which gets translated as "patience" here, carries that particular meaning. It is the opposite of the Zealot impulse, the temptation to take matters into your own hands by force or retaliation. James says no. Wait. Not because the injustice doesn't matter. It clearly does. But because the one who will set it right is already at the door.

Which brings me to that image in verse nine. "The Judge is standing at the door."

Not on his way. Not expected eventually. Standing at the door.

That is a striking way to put it. It conveys a kind of immediacy that is almost uncomfortable to sit with. James wants his readers to feel the nearness. He wants them to understand that the one who sees every defrauded worker, every suppressed cry, every act of oppression carried out against those with no power to resist, is not distant. He is right there. And this is not just comfort for the suffering.

James immediately connects it to a warning: "do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged." The nearness of the Judge is a call to how you treat people inside the community as much as it is a promise of justice from outside it.

The coming of the Lord has direct implications for what we do with each other. That is not incidental. We'll come back to that in a moment.

Now, James closes this section with two examples: the prophets and Job. And the way he uses them is worth noticing.

The prophets are held up as examples of people who kept speaking faithfully even while suffering for it. They were not spared difficulty because of their faithfulness. In many cases, faithfulness was precisely the reason they suffered.

But they kept going. James says, look at them. Consider what it meant to them to speak in the name of the Lord while enduring what they endured, and consider that they were not wrong to do it.

Then he comes to Job. And I want to be careful here, because James is doing something specific. He's not holding up Job as a model of quiet, stoic suffering. The canonical Job, the one in your Bible, is anything but quiet. He protests. He challenges. He demands an answer. In some places he is barely holding on. What James holds up is not the serenity of Job, but the steadfastness of Job. The fact that through everything, he did not let go. And then James says: look at the outcome the Lord brought about.

The word telos in verse eleven, translated as "purpose" in the ESV, carries the sense of result or ending brought about. What happened in the end? What did the Lord do with Job's suffering? He restored him. He showed himself to be compassionate and merciful. The eschatological hope in James is not cold cosmic justice. It is justice from a God who is also, and deeply, merciful. That matters enormously. We are not waiting for a tribunal. We are waiting for a person.

So let me ask the question that I think most of us are quietly holding by this point.

James writes as though the Lord's coming is very near. "The coming of the Lord is at hand." And yet here we are, a long way down the road from James's original readers. Two thousand years is not a short wait. What do we do with that?

I want to be honest about this rather than just explain it away.

The best thing I can say is this: James is not giving us a calendar date. He is giving us a motivating certainty. The farmer doesn't know which morning he will wake up to see the early rains beginning. He can't schedule it. What he knows is that they will come. And that knowledge, held firmly enough, is what keeps him farming when the soil is dry and the waiting is long.

The imminence language in James functions the same way. It's not saying "within the next few years." It's saying, the arrival is so certain it is as good as being already at the door. And every generation of the church has been called to live with exactly that posture: not calculating the day, not assuming it will never come, but leaning forward toward an ending that is real.

I find something pastoral in the honesty of that. James does not promise his readers that the wait will be short. He promises that the one they are waiting for is worth waiting for, and that the outcome he brings is mercy.

So what does this actually mean for how we live?

Let me draw three threads together.

The first is patience with people who have wronged us. James 5:9 lands a warning right in the middle of this eschatological passage: don't grumble against one another, because the Judge is at the door. This is not an instruction to be conflict-avoidant or to suppress legitimate grievances. It's a deeper call. It's saying: you don't have to play judge. There is one standing at the door already. You can let go of the scorekeeping. The eschatological hope, held firmly, actually frees us from the exhausting work of keeping the accounts ourselves.

The second is staying faithful when justice is slow. One of the most important things James is doing in this passage is writing to people who have been waiting a long time and whose suffering is real. He doesn't dismiss it. He doesn't say, it's fine, don't worry about it. He says: your cries have been heard. The Lord of hosts has those cries in his ears (5:4). What you are waiting for is not nothing. Keep farming. That is different from passive resignation. It is active, expectant, dignified waiting. There is something remarkably dignified about the farmer in James's image. He is not defeated by the delay.

The third is the most important. The character of the one who is coming shapes how we wait. James lands this passage on a note of mercy and compassion. The Lord is compassionate and merciful. He's reaching back to some of the deepest language in the Old Testament about who God is, the kind of language that echoes the Psalms and the character revealed to Moses at Sinai. We are not waiting for a cold tribunal. We are waiting for the one whose character is mercy. That means we can hold our hope without fear, and it means we can hold our neighbours with the same mercy we are expecting to receive from God.

Before we close, I want to connect this episode to where we've been and where we're going.

In Part 1, we looked at how trials produce endurance. Here in chapter five, that endurance gets its deepest motivation. We endure because we believe the story has an ending, and because the one bringing the ending is good.

In Part 5, we saw that faith without works is dead. The eschatology of James explains the urgency behind that. If you actually believe that the story is heading toward the restoration of all things, it changes what you do with your hands between now and then. It changes how you treat the person in front of you. It changes what you consider worth spending yourself on.

wAnd coming up in Part 7, we're going to spend a full session on speech and the tongue. I want you to notice something: right in the middle of this eschatological passage, James says, "do not

grumble against one another." The coming of the Lord has direct implications for what comes out of your mouth. We'll get into that in depth next time.

For now, I want to leave you with the image James leaves us with.

The farmer doesn't know the day. He can't control the rain. He can't rush the season. But he keeps farming, because the harvest is real. And the question James leaves with us is not whether we can calculate the return of the Lord. It's whether we actually believe it's coming. Because if we do, it changes everything about how we live in the meantime.

I hope and pray that as you grapple with what James is saying here, you find that the hope he's pointing to is not abstract or distant. It's as close as a hand on a doorknob. And the one standing at the door is compassionate and merciful.