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## Prayers

### To God

*Praise God quietly for as long as you can today. Give this time, perhaps at the expense of other parts of your devotions; let the Lord be your exclusive focus for as long as you have to give Him. Make a note of how long this is and reflect on the figure.*

### For myself

*Pray about the way you speak; your mannerisms and your tone of voice. Do these things help or hinder your witness to the love of God? We like to think that we have no need to deal with such things, but those who know themselves well by the Holy Spirit, are those who can grow spiritually and in every way to fulfil God's call.*

### For others

Weekly theme: Travel

Thank You Lord God that we live at a time when it is possible to travel throughout the world, and we can access countries and people with relative ease. May we use the blessing of this gift to spread the Good News of Your great love for all people, and may we be willing to invest in everything necessary to accomplish this great task. AMEN

## Meditation

Lord Jesus, You are special, very special:

You came as the King of all the earth;  
Teaching people the truth about God,  
Demonstrating Your authority over evil,  
And performing great signs and wonders.

You came as the Servant of all people;  
Doing all the work the Father gave You,  
Showing commitment to the path of love,  
And submitting to God's will on the Cross.

You came as a Man, yet still being God;  
Living side by side with friends and sinners,  
Healing, liberating, caring, listening,  
And giving up heaven to share our world.

You came as God, the Eternal Word;  
To show all people the way to the Father,  
To prove that mercy triumphs over judgement  
And defeat all evil in resurrection's power!

Jesus, You are special, very special.

## Bible Passage

### **James 5:10-12**

<sup>10</sup> My friends, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord as an example of suffering and patience. <sup>11</sup> As you know, those who have stood firm are considered by us as blessed. You have heard of the patient endurance of Job, and have seen the Lord's ultimate purposes, for He is extremely kind-hearted and compassionate.

<sup>12</sup> Above all, my friends, do not swear to make a promise, either by heaven or by earth or by anything else, but let your "Yes" be yes and your "No" be no, so that you may not come under judgement.

## Review

As James draws near to the end of his letter, he offers two pieces of advice. Verses 10 and 11 encourage God's people to be patient in the midst of their sufferings, and verse 12 calls on them to be utterly open and honest in their dealings with each other. After all the problems James has identified and spoken against in this letter, his advice here is welcome, and firmly based in Old Testament scripture and the teachings of Jesus.

At the very beginning of James' letter he called on his readers to stand firm in the face of troubles and persecution (1:2,3). His point seems to be that those who learn to do this by the grace of Christ will mature in faith and become effective in the work of the Gospel (1:4). In view of the considerable trouble James unearths in the life of the church throughout this letter, we should conclude that he was as much concerned about the church's self inflicted troubles as those it endured from outside or worldly forces. So Christian maturity is therefore as much about dealing in a Christ-like manner with evils such as partiality (2:1-7), slander (3:6-12) and false teaching (2:14-26), as it is about tackling opposition and persecution in the world or the tricks of the 'tempter' (1:12-16).

When James calls on his readers to examine the example of the prophets (5:10f.), what we have just observed is substantially true of their experience and maturity. While the ultimate 'trouble' and adversity endured by God's people was undoubtedly the result of persecution by Assyrians and Babylonians (in the days of the later prophets), the persecution faced by most of the prophets of God came from within Israel. Their stories are a reminder of how God's people are afflicted by the attacks of the enemy.

For example, the prophet Elijah was hunted down by Jezebel, the queen of king Ahab (1 Kings 16:29f.), and he survived a massacre of the Lord's prophets (to challenge the prophets of Ba'al (1 Kings 18:4). This powerful prophet had moments of doubt (1 Kings 19) but showed great maturity and spiritual strength to stand firm and pass the prophetic mantle on to Elisha, at a critical time in the history of God's people (1 Kings 22, 2 Kings 1f.). As Elijah

so clearly saw, the evil that brought down the northern kingdom of Israel came from within Israel, not from her external enemies, hence his prophecies.

Another example is the prophet Jeremiah, who endured horrendous physical abuse not from Judah's Babylonian enemies, but from other prophets who hated his message (Jer 27,28). He nearly died after being thrown by them into a well, but survived to deliver prophecies that were later discovered to be a stunning analysis not just of Israel's sins and God's judgement, but of God's ultimate love for His people and desire for a new 'covenant' to reflect this (Jeremiah 31:31-33). So victory not over but through suffering is now central to our understanding of salvation, and James reminds us here of the essential witness of these great prophets. Through their suffering they have much to teach us about Christian discipleship and the Kingdom of God.

The ultimate Biblical example of mature victory over adversity comes from the story of Job (5:11), whose story of suffering and endurance fills 42 chapters of the Old Testament. James reminds us that Job's perseverance in faith was blessed by God (Job 42), and though most people only ever read the first and final chapters of this substantial book, its central chapters (3-41) are the most extensive discussion in the Bible not just of suffering, but of the very nature of God.

Some of the greats of church history, Luther and Wesley among them, notably spent considerable time studying this Scripture. Their study of Job helped them understand the profound depth of God's love that would ultimately be demonstrated in Jesus' death and resurrection, which was for each evangelist, the very core of their preaching. They discovered for themselves and preached to people everywhere what James summarises here in verse 11, which is that God is '*kind-hearted and compassionate*' (5:11) and His ultimate purposes for us are glorious and will overcome all worldly ills. Ultimately, they preached a God of love and not a God whose judgements threatened remorseless wrath.

The last verse of this passage contains a powerful and interesting observation by James about open and honest faith. In ancient times it was common for people to swear or make promises to people by calling on the name of the gods as witnesses that they would do what they said. This is what the Bible means by 'swearing', not merely using God's name as a profanity. So when James says '*do not swear to make a promise*', he is calling on God's people not to use this cultural habit.

Most of us are captive to a number of cultural habits, and we only have to travel to other parts of the world for some of them to be made obvious to us. Most people in the UK would never talk to another person in the street, for example, but in rural Africa, such an attitude would be highly offensive. Yet we find it so hard to break out of such habits and be approachable! James is bold enough to tell his readers that they must not let cultural habits get in the way of the truth of the Gospel, and he urges God's people, just as Paul does in 2 Corinthians 1:17f. to be people of plain speech so that there is no ambiguity in the proclamation of the Gospel. '*Let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no*' (5:11, 2 Cor 1:17) is imperative advice for those who want people to believe the Gospel they proclaim, let alone for those who want to live in peace with one another!

Whatever happens to us in this world will be used by God for His glory, and mature Christians will rise above natural feelings of daily disappointment or joy to have faith in God's greater mercies and wiser plans. They will also be fixed on the plain facts of faith in the saving power of God; they are secure in God.

# Discipleship

## ***Application***

### ***Being patient and enduring hardship***

Some prefer an easy Gospel that says 'believe in God and everything in this life will be fine!' What a delusion! Life is tough, but our sufferings in this life are redemptive, that is, they are for our good and the good of others. Without the assurance of this and its basis in Scripture, some Christians abandon faith quickly when suffering comes. Jesus Himself explained that this would happen (Matt 13:6), and this is sad, because of all people, He knew that with suffering comes the greatest fulfilment and the greatest glory (Matt 26:36ff).

One of the points underlying James' writing here is that we should expect to be patient and endure hardship. Others have done so before us, and indeed, God's salvation plan is built on God's long-suffering kindness and love, shown to us in Christ. So if we think of our suffering is a punishment from God or the unjust consequences of a troubled world, then we need to think again about what the Bible says. They are the route through which God brings us into our salvation and ultimately into the greater blessings of the Kingdom of God. In addition, we may have confidence that victory is indeed ours, because God raised Jesus from the dead! We do not boast in this as if we have anything to do with how it happened, but we share it by way of giving evidence of God's saving love as our testimony of grace.

### ***The example of Job***

Job is an extraordinary character. His story doubtless comes from very ancient times, and the book we now have that contains his story is also a highly sophisticated teaching aid for God's people. If you read through the book, you will be struck but the eventual simplicity of Job's faith and trust in God, which alone survives his illness, trouble and disaster. This is why James continues with his point about simplicity of faith in verse 12.

## ***Ideas for what to do***

- Go for a walk and reflect on those occasions when you have suffered because of others or because of difficult circumstances. Ask the Lord to enlighten your heart about what this all means for your journey of faith.
- Keep your eyes open for those around you who suffer, and find small ways to try and acknowledge their pain or help them in appropriate ways.

## ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. Discuss amongst yourselves the different stories of the Bible you know which illustrate the triumph of God's ways through trouble and suffering.
2. Why do you think that people abandon faith in God today?
3. How easy is it to speak plainly? In what ways do people qualify their 'Yes' or 'No' in order to safeguard their own interests today?

## Final Prayer

Speak simply to my soul, Lord Jesus, do not hold back the truth. Tell me where I have failed and need to repent, and tell me how I can be victorious and praise Your Name! Lead me into greater confidence in all that it means to be a servant of Yours in Your world; AMEN