

A Call to Endure Persecution Patiently: A Fresh Look at James 5:7-20 in Context

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Evangelical scholars generally agree that James 5:7-20 occurs within a context in which believers are urged to patiently endure trials for their faith until the Lord's return.¹ However, evangelicals neglect interpreting most of this text—particularly verses 12, 13-18, and 19-20—specifically within the latter setting. In this paper I will ask some probing questions about these verses and offer a brief exposition of James 5:7-20 that seeks to interpret cohesively this passage explored against the background mentioned earlier. What results will differ somewhat from the usual evangelical understanding.²

James' readers are clearly undergoing persecution on account of their faith (1:2-4). They are being persecuted at the hands of the wicked rich (5:1-6; cf. 2:6-7).³ For example, the rich are withholding their earned wages (5:4), living opulently at their expense (5:5), and even committing violent acts against them (5:6). Consequently, James urges these believers to be patient (*makroqume/w*) until the Lord returns (5:7, 8) and then provides them with three examples of patience to emulate, *viz.* the farmer (5:7), the prophets (5:10), and Job (5:11). James' readers are not to exact vengeance upon their persecutors, but rather, wait patiently for the Lord; for, he will judge and repay the wicked rich when he returns. And, James says, his return is imminent (5:9).

¹ James 5:7-20 seems to close somewhat of an *inclusio* for the letter of James. He recalls for his readers the theme of enduring the testing of faith, seen earlier in 1:2-4.

² This paper was originally read at the Evangelical Theological Society's 2001 annual meeting in Colorado Springs, CO.

³ The identity of the poor and the rich in James is a *crux interpretum* for the letter (cf. 1:9-11). One half of NT scholars believe that the poor and rich are believers and unbelievers, respectively, while the other half holds that they are poor and rich Christians. It is not absolutely necessary here to decide who these groups are because the wicked rich in this context are clearly persecuting the poor. Though the grammar of 1:9-11 at first look seems to favor the poor and rich Christian view, the present writer, due to the overall context of the letter, holds that the poor and rich in James are believers and unbelievers, respectively.

Evangelicals typically explain verse 9 in the light of the judgment that will accompany the Lord's return. Good reason exists for this explanation because (a) James has just mentioned the parousia in verses 7 and 8, and (b) the *i3na* clause in verse 9 indicates the purpose for the command not to speak against another—*viz.* avoiding judgment. Against this understanding, believers are instructed not to speak against one another in order that they might not be judged when the Lord comes back; for, he will judge such disparaging criticism when he returns. However, while the latter is certainly true, this explanation still seems to miss something of the specific context.

One may find it helpful to ask, “*Why* does James issue this command?” The latter question often goes unanswered in evangelical treatments of this text. Might verse 9 be further understood against the background of the trials and persecution that James' readers are undergoing? Keeping in mind the latter understanding, these Christians are told not to snipe and complain at one another (5:9) while enduring trials for their faith. Grumbling and sniping at one another is likely to occur when under pressure and facing persecution, thus James' admonition. Believers are to act patiently towards others rather than complain about them at such times.

Evangelicals also generally interpret verse 12 in the light of the judgment that will accompany the Lord's return. Good reason is likewise present for the latter explanation because of the earlier references to the parousia and because the *i3na* clause occurring at the end of the verse again denotes the purpose for the command—averting the Lord's judgment. Thus, James' readers are told not to use oaths flippantly—swearing to heaven or to earth—to guarantee the truth of their statements so that they will not fall under judgment for those actions when Christ comes back. However, if the latter understanding stands without further clarification then James' use of the phrase “above all” (*pro/ pantw=n*) in verse 12 becomes somewhat problematic. Unless one interprets the latter phrase as hyperbole or some other sort of literary device, as many do, then James would appear to be saying that, above everything else in the Christian life, believers are to watch taking oaths. This hardly seems to be the correct understanding and a fully plausible explanation of verse 12 is still lacking.

One may find it beneficial to ask, “*Why* does James prohibit the taking of oaths?” Surely he is not prohibiting the use of all oaths. One might ask further, “*What kind* of statements might James' readers be seeking to authenticate with their oath taking?” Should not the background of endurance and suffering again be kept in mind when seeking an explanation? We may infer that when asked whether they are Christians by those who would persecute them, James' readers should

not swear to God, to heaven, or to earth—using oaths frivolously to support the truth of their claims—presumably, negative ones like, “No, I am not a believer in Christ.” Rather, when interrogated about their faith, they are simply and sincerely to say “yes” or “no” in response (5:12). The latter understanding, which seems to act as a climax to James’ statement on endurance in verse 11,⁴ then makes good sense of the problematic phrase “above all” that he uses as an initial phrase in verse 12. These believers, above all, are not to deny their Lord in the face of trials and persecution. They are to give straight, truthful answers; they do so in order not to fall under judgment for their sin.

Evangelicals usually treat verses 13-18 as general exhortations for James’ readers to pray in all circumstances—most notably when they are really sick—while patiently awaiting the Lord’s return. As far as prayer is concerned, nothing is disputed about the latter viewpoint for James does indeed mention it in every verse. But might not one interpret verses 13-18 more precisely than they are usually explained in the light of what seems to be going on in the larger context?

James begins this passage by asking in verse 13 whether anyone amongst his readers is suffering affliction or misfortune (*kakopaqe/w*; cf. the cognate *kakopaqi/a* in verse 10, i.e. the “suffering” of the prophets).⁵ If so, he says, the proper thing to do is to pray. James next asks whether any of them is cheerful. If so, he says, those persons should respond by singing praises, presumably because they are not undergoing trials and persecution for their faith.

James then asks his readers in verse 14 whether any amongst them are weak (*a0sqenc/w*; lit.: “without strength”). If so, then the one who is weak is instructed to summon the church’s elders,⁶ and they (i.e. the elders) are to pray over him,⁷ anointing the afflicted person with oil in the name of the Lord. Though not dogmatic, suffice it to say here that this writer thinks that the anointing with oil (which always receives disproportionate attention in this text) probably has a religious purpose, rather than practical, and seems symbolic in nature.⁸ That is to say, the

⁴ Job endured, and since he endured, these believers can also. Not only is Job an example of patience to emulate while under trial, but he is one whom the Lord enabled to endure through a time of great trial. Some may object that Job’s trials cannot be called persecution. Perhaps so, but one could view Job as being persecuted by Satan for his blameless and upright faith in God.

⁵ The suffering that the prophets experienced is the affliction they incurred in the exercise of their duties as God’s spokesmen.

⁶ That is, those with spiritual oversight over the community (*presbu/teroj*).

⁷ The phrase *e0p0 au)to/n* may suggest that the elders stand over the weak person, perhaps laying their hands upon him as they pray.

⁸ For a full treatment of this issue and the various views see Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*. PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 238-242.

elders seem to anoint the person who is weak “in order vividly to show how that person is being set apart for God’s special attention in prayer”—the anointing with oil seems to be a “physical act symbolizing consecration.”⁹

Most scholars focus their attention in verse 14 on whether *a0sqenc/w* refers to being spiritually weak or physically sick. But have they perhaps overlooked the possibility that the term might mean something else given the letter’s context—namely, weak, without strength, or disabled, *due to persecution*? The latter nuance is certainly conceivable because the word is used that way elsewhere in the New Testament. For example, Paul uses the stative verb *a0sqenc/w* and its cognate noun *a0sqc/nea* metaphorically when he speaks of his persecution as an apostle (2 Corinthians 11:21, 29-30; cf. Hebrews 4:15; Judges 6:6, 15—LXX). Though the latter terms do often refer to physical sickness in the Gospels (e.g. Matthew 8:17; 25:39; Mark 6:56; Luke 4:40; 5:15; John 4:46; 5:5; etc.), Paul employs them in 2 Corinthians 11 to refer to the physical and mental discomfort he has endured while preaching the gospel. For the apostle, weakness is physical discomfort due to persecution, imprisonments, beatings, stonings, dangerous travels, robberies, encounters with natural disasters, life without physical necessities, and distress over concern for the churches (2 Corinthians 11:23-29).¹⁰

If this writer is pressed to decide in James whether *a0sqenc/w* refers to either a spiritual malady or a physical weakness due to persecution, then the term seems to refer more to the latter. But if so, the spiritual nonetheless enters the picture in that the physical weakness seems due (in context) to trials and persecution for one’s faith in Christ. The spiritual side of things comes further into play when James says at the end of verse 15: “and if he has committed sins, they (it) shall be forgiven him.” In other words, if the weak person has committed any sins that “come with the territory” of his weak condition, they will be forgiven him.¹¹ The latter action presumes that the afflicted person will deal with any spiritual misbehavior that may be related to what he is undergoing.

About what kind of specific sins might James be speaking? Interestingly, the reference to “sins” (*a9marti/a*) in verse 15 has a lexical connection to the “sinner” (*a(martwlo/j)*) mentioned in verse 20. Does James possibly have in mind here in verse 15 the sin of “straying away from the truth” that he addresses later in verses 19 and 20? If so, James may be saying in 5:15c that if the person has strayed from the truth while

⁹ Ibid., 240-241.

¹⁰ Summary sentence borrowed from Aida and William Spencer, *2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 129.

¹¹ Though many do so, it is not necessary to say that the potential sins mentioned in 15c are the cause of the weakness mentioned in verse 14.

getting hammered for the faith, then those sins can be forgiven by God, provided he repents and returns.

James issues the promise in 5:15 that the “prayer of faith” (cf. 1:6) by the elders will deliver/restore (sw?/zw) the one who is wasting away/fatigued (ka/mnw); further, the Lord will raise up the weak person.¹² That is to say, God uses the prayer offered by faith to bring results: the one who is weak due to persecution is delivered from his quagmire and God restores him; he is able to stand again (cf. Psalm 23, esp. verses 4-6).¹³

James concludes in verse 16a that his readers should corporately confess their sins to one another and pray for one another in order that they might be restored.¹⁴ Restored from what we might ask? If the interpretation of 5:15c given earlier is correct, they are restored from the sins of straying away from the truth.¹⁵

In verses 5:16b-18 James reminds his readers of the import of prior verses by referring to the extraordinary power of prayer in the life of the persecuted righteous (di/kaioj).¹⁶ When doing so, he cites Elijah as an example of a persecuted, righteous man who experienced such prayer (5:17a). The powerful prayer in Elijah’s life that James describes in 5:17-18 is the account found in 1 Kings 17 and 18 where God used a drought to punish Ahab and Israel for their idolatry; Elijah prayed for the drought to begin and then later to end.

¹² The unconditional terms of this statement seems a bit problematic. James is not advocating a “name and claim it” prayer life, saying that if one simply has enough faith, then whatever he asks will be granted. However, if the prayer is offered in faith (cf. 1:6), and conforms to God’s will and purpose, then the petition will be granted. God’s will is paramount in this matter. The prayer offered in faith acknowledges that God is sovereign and has the prerogative of answering prayer in any way he chooses. For a discussion of this issue, see Moo, *James*, 243-45.

¹³ Notice the similarity between what seems to be going on here in James and with the verses noted in Psalm 23; this affinity is worth further exploration.

¹⁴ BDAG, 465: The word *ija/omai* can mean “to restore someone to health after a physical malady, *heal, cure*” (Mt 8:8, 13; 15:28; Lk 7:7; 8:47; 17:15; J 5:13; Ac 5:16; etc.), or “to deliver from a variety of ills or conditions that lie beyond physical maladies, *restore, heal*” (Mt 13:15; J 12:40; Ac 28:27; Js 5:16; Heb 12:13).

¹⁵ The exegetical problem here is to determine how the prayer concerning the weakness is related to the prayer concerning forgiveness from sin. Some argue it is independent, while others view it as directly connected—either is possible.

¹⁶ Of whom Elijah is but one example. This is an extremely important term. Cf. the persecuted righteous in Matthew’s gospel—e.g. 5:45; 23:35. Matthew 23 (v. 35) especially demonstrates the point. In that passage Jesus denounces the hypocrisy of the scribes and the Pharisees, pronounces woes on them, and says that they have disregarded and indeed will kill God’s true messengers, with the result that the blood of the righteous will be upon them. I am grateful to Dr. Alan Tomlinson, my NT colleague at Midwestern, for pointing out this nuance of the term to me.

Many scholars stress in verse 17 that the prophet was a person of “like passion,” i.e. a human being just like us, and thus, the encouragement by James for his readers seems to be, “Since Elijah was also human, if he can experience powerful prayer, then you can enjoy it also.” However, though Elijah is a human being “just like us,” he is more specifically a person who has undergone similar suffering and persecution (o9moioqaq/h/j; cf. again kakopaqi/a and kakopaqe/w) as James’ readers.¹⁷

Evangelicals generally explain verses 19 and 20 by saying that James instructs his readers to help foolish erring believers if they turn away from the truth, i.e. from the Christian faith.¹⁸ The latter understanding seems correct. However, evangelicals rarely seem to provide an answer as to why those who claim to be Christ’s are deserting the faith. In the context of 5:7-20, *why* would someone want to turn away from the truth? Could it be that some who profess Christ are renouncing the faith because they are being tested or indeed have suffered on account of their faith and they do not like it? For them, to turn away from the truth is an opportunity to escape the persecution that accompanies holding to faith in Christ. James, not lacking in compassion, instructs his readers to rescue these people who have departed. Believers are encouraged to act as instruments in keeping straying persons from eternal death and in covering their sins (5:20; cf. Psalm 32:1).¹⁹ Their sins are covered and forgiven from God’s sight when forgiveness is procured. Forgiveness is procured when confession and repentance takes place and they return to the faith.

This writer acknowledges that there are other ways to understand this passage in the letter of James. He sought briefly to explore some lexical nuances and interpretative possibilities in the letter of James that are sometimes overlooked by evangelical scholars. Several no doubt will say that some of what this writer has said in this paper was inferred—perhaps so, but if so, it was done, arguably, with good reason. Biblical writers composed their works in a context containing a flow of thought. They did not divorce what they wrote from the verses that preceded and proceeded. The explanation of James 5:7-20 put forth in this paper sought to link together a series of related ideas in a coherent pattern. Context determines the meaning of words, and several words in 5:7-20—like makroqume/w, kakopaqi/a, kakopaqe/w, a0sqene/w,

¹⁷ Notice the lexically-connected words in the text: kakopaqi/a (v. 10), kakopaqe/w (v. 13), o(moioqaq/h/j (v. 17). BDAG, 706: The word o(moioqaq/h/j (cf. o3moioj, pa/sxw) pertains to “experiencing similarity in feelings or circumstances.”

¹⁸ The statement is conditional.

¹⁹ Curtis Vaughan, *James* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969), 124.

o9moiopaqh/j, and di/kaioj—seem to make good sense and fit the scenario of endurance and persecution that was painted therein.

Much of what one says in James no doubt will be in keeping with what he sees as the letter's purpose. The exposition offered above seems very much in keeping, not only with the context, but with what this writer thinks may be the overall purpose of the letter of James—i.e. James wrote this letter to persecuted Jewish Christians scattered outside of Palestine who are still part of synagogue communities. He exhorts his readers to consistent Christian living and addresses problems that have arisen as a result of their “institution within an institution”-type of relationship.²⁰

Application

Provided the interpretation above is correct, we can make the following brief points of application. First, this passage ostensibly has no immediate application, especially verses 13-18, unless believers are being persecuted for their faith. Second, Christians need to take stock of how they react in the face of persecution and trials for their faith. Third, believers should consider their roles in their church's ministry to the persecuted church. If their church has no such ministry, then they might want to help start one—especially a ministry of intercessory prayer for those who are being persecuted on account of Jesus. Further, they might also visit websites like www.persecutedchurch.org where they can learn the status of the persecuted church in various countries across the world, what they can do to help these fellow believers, and how specifically to pray for them.

²⁰ That is, the church within, or connected, to the synagogue. Though not exactly alike, my view on the purpose of James is somewhat similar to that of R.W. Wall, *Community of the Wise: The Book of James* (NTC; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1997). But, to show that this is likely the purpose for the letter of James is another paper for another day.