OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

"Waitin' for the Light to Shine"

David Anguish

I don't recall a Christian school choral group I've sung with or heard that did not include some spirituals in their repertoire. The singers typically find the songs enjoyable to sing and they are usually audience favorites. But I don't think their style completely explains their appeal. These songs look forward, heavenward, to the time God's people will be delivered from the bondage of a fallen and corrupt creation (Rom 8.18–23). They have titles like, "Ain'ta That Good News" and "Soon-A Will Be Done," the latter looking forward to the cessation of "the troubles of the world" when there will be "no more weepin' and a wailin'" because "I'm goin' to live with God" (read the lyrics to these and others here). Spirituals are songs of the oppressed, born in the fields where slaves and sharecroppers toiled.

Their circumstances approximate those of the readers depicted in James 5. They were oppressed by wealthy landowners who lived as if there would be no accountability of judgment, a notion of which James disavows them in 5.1–6. But, if judgment day was coming for the oppressors, it was also coming for the "brothers" (cf. 5.7, 9–10) who were their victims. James 5.7–11, the first part of which we will examine here, tells them to be prepared.

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Action and Rationale

Verse 7's "therefore" (οὖν, *oun*) connects verses 7–11 with verses 1–6; the vocative "brothers" suggests that what follows is the expected reaction of the believers to the trials just described. The phrase, "the coming [παρουσία, *parousia*] of the Lord" accentuates that expectation. The same judgment that awaited the greedy rich would be welcome relief for the faithful.

"The coming of the Lord" "quickly took on the fixed meaning of Jesus' return in glory and as a judge" (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 226). While secular Greek typically used *parousia* to refer "to the 'arrival' of a king or dignitary" (Moo 2000, 221), for Christians, it rapidly became a word of anticipation; they took comfort in knowing that the "Lord of hosts" who would settle accounts with their oppressors would bring justice to them. But they must "be patient" (μακροθυμήσατε, *makrothymēsate* is an imperative verb) "until the coming of the Lord." "Patience," a term we will examine more closely in comparison with "endurance" in a subsequent study, suggests the idea of active perseverance. As used here, it serves to tell the readers to leave judgment to God and not take matters into their own hands. When God will judge is an open question, however; James gives no timetable, and the word "until" (ἕως, *eōs*) suggests "the idea of a goal as well as a time period" (Moo 2000, 222).

The patience that James commands requires trust, a point he illustrates with the conditions at the eastern end of the Mediterranean where "the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth … until it receives the early and the late rains" (v. 7). According to Blomberg and Kamell (2008, 227), "the early rains normally lasted from mid-October to mid-November, while the late rains spanned key portions of March and April. Thus, the two main harvest (and planting) seasons came in the fall and spring." Once again, James is using imagery that was familiar to Jewish readers; the phrase, "early and late rains" was used in OT contexts that affirmed the Lord's faithfulness (Deut 11.14; Jer 5.24; Hos 6.3; Joel 2.23; Zech 10.1) (Moo 2000, 223). The trust for which James was calling, based on the assurance of the Lord's care, was needed because the farmers could not force their crops to grow and produce; they had to wait, just as James's readers had to wait for the Lord's coming and judgment. But their wait would be worth it, as indicated by the reference to the "precious" (τίμιος, *timios*) fruit produced; only here in Scripture is *timios* used to refer to something precious other than jewels and crowns (Johnson 1995, 314).

Teaching and Motivation

Having illustrated the virtue of waiting, James repeats his command to be patient (v. 8), explains what it means in practice, and gives them a reason to obey. He tells them to "establish [στηρίζω, *stērizō*] your hearts." The NIV translates *stērizō* "stand firm," which is what a farmer must do while waiting for his harvest to ripen. Johnson notes that

> James' language evokes a Septuagintal idiom, "strengthening the heart," which, depending on the context, can mean to gain physical strength, as for a journey (Judg 19:5, 8; Ps 103:15), or courage that comes from trust in the Lord (Ps 111:8), or firmness of intention (Sir 6:37;

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> 22:16; see also 1 Thess 3:13). It is undoubtedly one of these latter two meanings James intends (Johnson 1995, 315).

As in other exhortations to spiritual firmness in the NT (Luke 22.32; Rom 1.11; 16.25; 1 Thess 3.2; 2 Thess 2.17; 3.3; 1 Pet 5.10; 2 Pet 1.12), the believers are expected to "fortify themselves for the struggle against sin and with difficult circumstances" (Moo 2000, 223).

They were motivated for faithfulness "because [ὅτι, *hoti*] the coming of the Lord is near" (v. 8, literally). This is a spiritual perspective that assumes "the last days" (5.3) have begun, but no announcement about their duration has been made. The timetable is God's; his perspective is eternity (cf. Ps 90.4). God's people should be prepared because the coming could come at any time.

Living in View of the Lord's Coming

Verses 9–11 will elaborate more, but from what we have seen in verses 7–8, we suggest three application points here.

First, we must get our priorities right and refuse to "act as though judgment remains far off" (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 228). Like our ancient brothers and sisters, we should live as people who expect the Lord's coming at any time (Moo 2000, 224).

Second, we must be patient and leave it to God to work out the time and apply the judgment for the injustices we witness and experience.

Third, like the prophets who, in meeting injustice, "spoke in the name of the Lord" (v. 10), "we must busy ourselves with kingdom work," doing all we can to see God's purposes realized (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 227).

Conclusion

I like the songs Roger Miller composed for the musical, *Big River*, a retelling of the Huck Finn story. At various points, they depict the longing to be free that was typical of slaves in antebellum America. Some have the feel of a spiritual as, for example, when the cast sings of "crossing to the other side" where "Jesus will be there to meet me," or when they sing, "How blest we are as children of a God so good and true."

The other characters are longing for what Huck Finn struggles to find, as he sings near the beginning of the play and again in a reprise near its end. In the song, "Waitin' for the Light to Shine," he confesses that his life has been "undirected" and "cloudy," spent "in the darkness until now." But he holds out hope, "waitin' for the light to shine" (read Miller's lyrics here).

James 5 reminds us that the Light has been shining for some time and will one day act to reward the faithful who have endured injustice as God's elect. James's counsel should therefore continue to encourage us: "Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand."

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Johnson, Luke Timothy. 1995. *The Letter of James: A New Translation and Commentary*. The Anchor Bible. vol. 37A. Doubleday.

Moo, Douglas J. 2000. *The Letter of James*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Additional Thoughts on James

"I would love to know how James's message [in 4.7–10] was received in his day. James is properly described as a 'prophet-pastor' (Webster 1991:22), and I wonder whether he sounded too much like the Old Testament prophets to be very popular. He may be recalling passages like Amos's prophecies of wailing and mourning (5:16; 8:10). Amos was ordered to go away and stop prophesying. James's message is not the kind of spiritual direction most people want to hear today; the church is being pressured to rely on counsel that is only affirming, programs that are merely entertaining and music that is always upbeat. Yet the problems James has addressed require a submission that is humbling, a resistance that is demanding, an attitude that is sorrowful and life changes that are radical."

~ George M. Stulac. 1993. *James*. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series. ed. Grant R. Osborne. InterVarsity Press, 150

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