

**James 5:7-12, No. 14**  
**“The Coming of the Lord is at Hand”**  
**April 3, 2016**  
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We have been away from James for some weeks now and return with only a few paragraphs remaining in the book. The one we consider this evening is, as the rest of James’ letter, a lesson in wisdom. Proverbs, the OT’s most elaborate presentation of biblical wisdom, as you know, has things to say about patience or steadfastness and about reckoning with the future when making decisions in the present. Think of Proverbs’ famous contrast between the ant and the sluggard! Also typical of the letter as a whole, James closely follows the teaching of the Lord Jesus, even, in some cases, virtually word for word.

**Text Comment**

- v.7 Once again James addresses his readers as “brothers,” indicating and emphasizing that his subject is the perspective and attitude *believers* ought to have in the world in light of the events that are sure to come. The key terminology of the passage are forms of two different words groups meaning “patience,” three times in vv. 7-8, once in v. 10, and “endure,” or “persevere” twice in vv. 10-11. [Moo, 220-222] In these verses “patience” is the self-restraint that does not hastily retaliate against a wrong, and “steadfastness” is the temper that does not easily succumb under suffering. [R.J. Knowling in Motyer, 172] Throughout the short passage the motivation for such patience and steadfastness is the coming of the Lord both in salvation and in judgment.

The word translated “coming” here is *parousia*, the term used regularly in the New Testament for the appearing of the Lord in glory. The Latin term is *adventus*, or advent or arrival. *Parousia* is used for the Second Coming by Jesus himself, by Paul, Peter, and John. The term was currently in use among Greek speakers to describe official visits by a monarch to a city within his dominions. [Tasker, 117] It literally means “presence.” In its use in the NT it makes a definite contrast with the Lord’s first coming, in which he stole into the world unrecognized, his glory hidden. It will not be so when he comes again. He will be present and everyone will know it.

The harvest is precious because it sustains our physical life, as well as the living of the farmer, just as Peter says Christ’s blood is *precious* because it makes spiritual life, eternal life possible. But the farmer has to wait for it, wait for each stage of its growth before he can ever harvest the grain or fruit. The period between the first appearance of the shoots of grain and the harvest was only four months, but it was a time of hopeful waiting in a country so dependent on the timely arrival of the autumn and spring rains, one soon after planting the other when the crop was ripening. [Tasker, 119] But the rains usually come and the farmer expects them to come.

- v.9 The patience or steadfastness that James seems to have in mind is self-restraint, a willingness to wait on the Lord to avenge wrongs. Whether the previous paragraph that dealt with the injustices perpetrated by the rich and powerful prompted these thoughts or

not, what is being required of us is that we neither lose patience with God – because he doesn’t vindicate us and punish those who act against us as quickly as we think he should – nor with one another, taking upon ourselves, if only in our hearts, the role of judge and executioner. [Tasker, 117] Blaming others is a form of impatience. And, typically, we vent our frustration on those who are near to us, the members of our family or our spiritual community. The thought is akin to what we find in Proverbs 20:22: “Do not say, ‘I will repay evil’; wait for the Lord, and he will deliver you.” So many of our hard words, whether or not we admit it to ourselves, are an expression of our own impatience, our sense of our having been wronged and the Lord not doing anything about it! [Moo, 224-225] Twice now James has emphasized the imminence of the Lord’s return: “the coming of the Lord is at hand” in v. 8 and “the Judge is standing at the door” in v. 9.

Once again we are reminded, as we are so often in the New Testament, that we too – even we Christians must stand in the judgment. That coming reckoning ought to have a powerful effect on our behavior, making us careful not to behave in a way the Lord will condemn when he brings our lives into judgment.

- v.11 The prophets described the first and second comings of the Lord long before, indeed centuries before his first coming. It is not clear that they really understood that there would be *two separate comings* of the Lord with centuries to elapse between them. They had to wait for their prophesies to be fulfilled. What is more, virtually every prophet of whom we know anything from the Old Testament suffered persecution on account of his message – unwelcome as it so often was to the authorities and the people alike – but nevertheless remained steadfast, hopeful, and obedient in the teeth of that opposition. Why? Because he knew what the future would bring! We are to take courage from their example and put on patience as they did, waiting on the Lord to fulfill his word.

This is not our subject this evening, but I hope you all appreciate what a world of comfort and encouragement there are in those words, “You have heard of the patience or steadfastness of Job.” The encouragement of this statement is that, in a striking way, it reminds us that us that we can be people who are genuinely righteous, holy, and godly, *despite our glaring weaknesses and our failures and our embarrassing lapses*. This is as profound a demonstration of the grace of God as the forgiveness of our sins. James commends Job’s patience or steadfastness (the word has both ideas). But if you’ve ever read Job you know very well that there are many more chapters that describe Job’s *impatience* than chapters that show him patient and steadfast. He griped his way right through the book, complained bitterly against God and grumbled against his friends, just as James tells us here not to do. Still, through all the complaint, Job kept looking to God. He never lost his faith. The Puritan pastor, Christopher Love, shrewdly comments on James’ remark: “He might also have said, ‘Ye have heard of the impatience of Job.’” After all there is a great deal more of Job’s impatience in the chapters that make up the book of Job than there is about his patience. Love goes on:

*“But God reckons his people not by what is bad in them, but by what is good in them.” [Sermons, vol. 3 “On Growing in Grace”]*

In other words, what was well done is mentioned to his praise and what was poorly done is not counted against his virtue, certainly doesn't count as much in the evaluation of Job's life and character. God will not quench the smoking flax or break the bruised reed. He will reward the good in us and largely overlook the bad. So Job spoke magnificently at the beginning of his trial – “The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord” – and even though he didn't maintain that state of mind and had to be severely rebuked at the end of the poem, it was that early state of mind for which Job is remembered in heaven. Think of the Lord's remark in his high-priestly prayer in John 17 about his disciples: that they were given to the Lord by his Father and “they have obeyed your word.” Really? Did those men really obey the Word of the Lord? Yes; they did, despite all their stumbles, of which there were plenty, as the Gospels make perfectly clear. Or think of Peter's remark that Lot was a righteous man, who was distressed by the wicked lives of the men of Sodom and Gomorrah living among them day after day. We tend to think, “Well, if he was so distressed, why didn't he get out of there?” Or, “If he was so righteous he should have been contented with the hill country like his Uncle Abraham and never gone to Sodom and Gomorrah in the first place, given the moral reputations of those cities.” But Lot was a righteous man in the midst of wickedness, no matter that there were some very obvious lapses in Lot's life of righteousness. Or, above all, think of Samson among the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11. “What in the world is he doing there, that dolt;” at least so we think. But he was a man of faith and of faithfulness no matter his obvious and far too frequent spiritual failures. The Lord is indeed “compassionate and merciful” in nothing so much as this: that he considers the good things that we do as the chief evidence of our character and overlooks so much of the bad. In other words, when he comes the Lord will be looking for what he can praise in his children! [Motyer, 179]

- v.12 Verse 12 is the nearest thing to a direct citation of Jesus in a letter that, more than any other in the NT, depends upon the teaching of Jesus himself. [Moo, 7] The “But above all...” suggests that when we are tempted to lose heart or to grumble the one thing we must not do is to begin using the Lord's name in vain, to use the name of the Almighty to punctuate our speech in the heat of the moment or to express our unhappiness about the state of our affairs by some explosive or irreverent oath.

Now, before we can apply this text to our own lives and circumstances we must clear up a problem. Twice in these few verses James says that the coming of the Lord is near; indeed, the Judge is standing at the door! But how can this be? James wrote in the middle of the first century; nearly two millennia separate his time from ours. Two thousand years and counting is no one's idea of “near.” James has here laid his finger on a standing problem in the interpretation of the New Testament. As you know there are many statements in the New Testament that describe the Second Coming as something that will happen *soon*. Jesus said it, Paul said it, Peter said it, and the author of Hebrews said it. “For in just a very little while, ‘He who is coming will come and will not delay.’” Virtually the last words of the New Testament are these:

“He who testifies to these things says, ‘Yes, I am coming soon.’” [Rev. 22:20]

Liberal biblical scholarship knows what to do with such statements. It maintains that Jesus and his disciples *thought* that the Second Coming would happen quite soon after Pentecost and, when it didn't, the New Testament had to be adjusted with the addition of parables about the landowner going on a long journey and his servants falling asleep because they waited for him so long without his return, or statements about how the gospel had to be preached throughout the world before the Lord could return, and so on.

That was never a very good argument, but it became an impossible argument when the dating of the New Testament books were shoved into the middle of the first century as it has been over the last hundred years. Enough time had not elapsed to force the church to adjust the record. But, in fact, this sort of dialectic – this sort of juxtaposition of seemingly contrary ideas – in this case the imminence of the Lord's return and its delay, is so commonplace in the teaching of the Bible it would be more of a surprise if we did not find that kind of apparent contradiction it here as well. We are told that the coming of the Lord is near and that it cannot happen until other things – including some things that would in the nature of the case have taken a great deal of time - have come to pass; we are told that the Lord is coming quickly but we are also told not to lose heart watching for him. And we are told that even the Lord himself – that is Jesus the man – did not know the day or the hour of his return, how much more must you and I live in ignorance of it.

To be sure, we are given some instruction that can help somewhat in coming to terms with these two quite distinct messages about the timing of the Second Coming, messages that often sit side by side on the same page of the New Testament. You children know from your reading of the Narnia Chronicles that time is one thing on earth and another in Narnia. When the children slip through the magic wardrobe they can engage in months and years' worth of great adventures in Narnia, yet when they return to earth-time they find that time has on earth largely stood still. [Motyer, 179] That is C.S. Lewis' way of expressing the truth that Peter gives us in 2 Peter 3. He is addressing our very question – when is the Lord's return, and how can it be said to be soon? – when he says,

“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness.”

Peter is writing in the 60's of the first century, only 30 years after the Lord's resurrection and his ascension to Heaven. So how does he explain that the Lord has still not returned to earth (though he is only writing twenty years – more or less – after James)? Well, says Peter, “With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day.” Then he goes on to say that the Lord delays his return precisely to give the world a chance to be saved! Peter makes the point directly: scoffers may doubt that the Lord will ever come, but, says Peter, be sure you know that the day of the Lord *will come* and when it comes it will be all that the Scripture has taught us it will be: glorious salvation for the people of God and catastrophe for the unsaved.

This is the Bible's way of teaching us that the Lord's return may prove to be a long time in coming *but we are to be ready for it at any time nonetheless*. We are to live our lives in the active expectation of his coming again. In a fabulous passage that I knew I had to remember and write in my Bible as soon as I read it, Robert Candlish – the great 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish preacher – perfectly captured the spirit of the Bible's teaching about both the imminence and delay of the Second Coming in a sermon entitled “Christ Coming Quickly.” [In I. Murray, *The Puritan Hope*,

216-217] I'm reading a long citation from that sermon, but it is worth your paying close attention.

“To a believer, the mere possibility, or even absolute certainty, of ages being yet to elapse before the Lord comes again, ought no more to diminish the influence of that event upon his mind, and heart, and conscience, than the fact of ages having elapsed since the Lord came at first lessens the moral weight of his constant vivid sight of Christ and him crucified... I know no chronology and no chronological computation of long eras, in dealing with that Savior, who eighteen hundred years ago trod with his blessed feet the soil of Judea, and expired on the cross of Calvary. Then why should there be any real difficulty in applying this principle in the prospect, more than in the retrospect? Does faith mounting up in the ascending series of years to the opening up of the fountain, long centuries ago, lose all sense of distance and remoteness, in the bright and vivid apprehension of the cross? And will not the same faith in its keen glance downwards and onwards along the stream of time, seize the one great and only object of its hope, and bring it near, even to the very door, ay, though ages may seem to come between?”

“...These are the two events, the death of shame, the coming in glory, which faith, when rightly exercised, grasps; which I, believing, grasp. I grasp them as equally real, equally nigh. Christ dying, near and present, Christ coming, near and present. What though ages have run since that death and ages more are perhaps to run before that coming! It is nothing to me. The world's history, past and future; the Church's history, past and future; all is to me for the present as if it never had been and never were to be... Wherever I am, whatever I am about, ought I not to be alive to my position between these two manifestations of Christ, and these alone? Behind me Christ dying; before me Christ coming. Is it not thus, and only thus, that I live by the faith of him who loved me and gave himself for me; that I live also by the power of the world to come; enduring as seeing him who is invisible?”

Candlish is precisely right. Take the famous statement at the beginning of Hebrews 12.

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily besets us, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

You see, we are being urged there to keep our eye fixed on Jesus both at the cross and sitting at the right hand. We are being urged to see those who lived in faith long before us as occupying the stands as we run our own race, cheering us on. Time and the limitations of time have disappeared and everything is present to our view: past and future. Everything is “now” for the Christian.

I think Candlish's insight a very profound and important way of summarizing the Bible's teaching and of the significance of the place of the Christian in what theologians call the “inter-

adventual” period - that is the period between the first and the second comings of the Lord. And remember this, the very point James’ reference to the prophets calls to mind. The prophets and those who believed their teaching did not have the Lord’s first coming behind them to strengthen their faith in his second coming. They were waiting for the Lord’s first coming. They did not have the benefit, *as we do*, of the grand historical verification of the apostles’ prophesies in the history of the Lord’s birth, life, ministry, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. We have all of that behind us and if that history unfolded as we read in the New Testament record, then surely nothing is as certain as that the Lord Jesus will come *again!*

Given that believers in Jesus Christ today are all going to die and be in heaven before the Lord returns – at least that seems more likely than not – it doesn’t really make any difference at all *when the Lord returns*, whether a few years from now or still a thousand years or more from now. And how will time be experienced by the dead in Christ when their souls are in Heaven? For them, too, will it be “a thousand years is but a day”? Will it seem like just a day has passed when they hear the summons to return to the earth in the train of the King of Kings? The *reality* of his coming again, the *certainty* of his coming again is the great point, a reality and a certainty in which we ought to live moment by moment and day by day. True enough, it wasn’t helpful for the American Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* to include a chart allowing worshippers to calculate the date of Easter as far ahead as A.D. 8500! That isn’t the best way to help people live in lively expectation of the Lord’s return! [Stott, *The Incomparable Christ*, 168]

On the other hand, it should not be hard for any Christian to realize what a huge difference in perspective it must make to consider our circumstances at any moment in light of the Second Coming. Certain things simply become utterly unimportant. Things we get upset about, or worry about, in many cases when held up against the prospect of the Second Coming become laughably, ridiculously irrelevant.

There is a story in my family – you know how stories like this get passed from generation to generation in a family – about my father and my mother. Mother used to love to tell it! For some reason I don’t ever remember hearing it from my Dad. They were traveling by car and Dad was peeved because they left late and were behind schedule. Of course I know how very rare that attitude is among men, how patient we almost always are when our wives hold us up and cause us to be late, but on this particular occasion my father was peeved. At one point mother interrupted the silence in the car and said that she would like to stop for a cup of coffee. That, of course, irked Dad even more. They were already behind time and this would only make matters worse! But they stopped at a Stuckey’s along the highway. He gassed up the car and when he came into the store there was mother sitting at a table enjoying her cup of coffee. He asked her in a peevish tone how much that coffee cost. “67 cents,” she replied. “*Sixty-Seven cents!*” *he stormed*. And at that moment it struck them both how ridiculous this all was and they burst out laughing. Nowadays in the Rayburn family, if anyone seems to be peeved about something utterly unimportant, we simply say “*Sixty-Seven Cents!*”

Well, James is saying something like that, only his point is much more sublime. Someone has not been kind or nice or polite to you. Someone has forgotten to serve you in some way. Some minor inconvenience has interrupted your day. What do you say to yourself? How do you steady yourself as a Christian, or, as James puts it here in v. 8, how do you establish your heart? Well

you say, not “Sixty-seven cents,” but “the coming of the Lord is at hand” or “the Judge is standing at the door.”

That puts anything, everything in an utterly different perspective. The unkind unbeliever is now not to be disliked or criticized but sorrowfully pitied. As Richard Baxter reminds us in regard to the unbeliever, “One hour in hell will burn out all the enjoyment that sin and unbelief ever brought to a human life.” Can’t you see him or her there: alone, terrified, utterly despairing? Even the Christian whose behavior has irked you, will someday regret that he or she behaved in that way. *And you know that.* Such knowledge is responsibility. As you will regret so much of what you said and did, so will he or she. The judgment awaits you as well as others, as James sternly reminds us in v. 9. Certainly that should produce in your heart some humility, some patience, some sympathy, some understanding, some willingness to forgive and ignore the offense. And, of course, you too must stand in judgment for how you behave in this moment! If the Lord’s coming doesn’t remind you of all of this, if it makes no difference to how you think and how you behave, how in the world will you justify that? No Christian can.

On the other hand, if you are suffering in some way, facing a challenge or experiencing some opposition, establish your heart by looking at the end of things. The Second Coming means not only that no trouble in this life is to be compared with the glories that will follow, but that your trials and tribulations have been transformed by that reality into opportunities to glorify God in more difficult circumstances. The more difficult the circumstances, the great glory redounds to God when his people bear up under them with grace, with kindness, with humility, and with a peaceable spirit.

Last Lord’s Day evening Dan Naulty challenged us to live “eschatologically,” especially in the matter of joy. Every joy in life is increased – I think increased exponentially - when it is remembered that, no matter how great, it is only a foretaste of still greater joy to come. And that is the greatest part of its joy or of any joy. If joy is not immortal, if our happiest moments and experiences in life are nothing more than temporary, evanescent surges of feeling in the body, signifying nothing, promising nothing, pointing to nothing, then the joy we find in such experiences must be severely diminished, if not extinguished by the recognition that this is the best we’ll ever get or feel and that it will be gone in a moment. As Tennyson said of love and of love’s immortality – and many of our happiest moments in life are times when we have felt the power of love – a blight would come on love. It would be

“half dead to know that it could die.”

Faith and love in Christian thought come very near to one another. They may be distinguished to some degree, but they can never be separated. No one can love God and one another in truth without faith, and no one can truly believe who does not love. Which is why sometimes in the New Testament believers are described as those who believe in Christ and sometimes as those who love Christ. The ancient Christian mystics had a saying: “ubi amor, ibi oculus.” That is, where love is, true sight may be found. That is, you see things as they really are, when your heart is full of love. Well, so it is with faith, which is loving belief, and, in particular, with faith in the Second Coming of the Lord. No one *truly sees* life as it is, understands *what it means* who is not

actively reckoning with the Second Coming. That reality *changes everything, invests in everything a completely different and magnificently higher meaning and purpose.*

Let me conclude with a few pages from John Stott's wonderful book *The Incomparable Christ*. In one section of the book he illustrates the way the Lord Jesus influenced men and women in various ways. And in one short chapter of that section he deals with Anthony Ashley Cooper, the famous Lord Shaftesbury of 19<sup>th</sup> century England.

Born in 1801, he had an unhappy childhood, neglected and abused by his parents. His only solace was their housekeeper, Anna Maria Milles, who told him Bible stories, taught him to pray and seems to have led him to personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

At the age of sixteen, while at Harrow School, he saw a group of drunken men drop a poor man's coffin in the street, cursing and laughing as they did so. He was sickened and disturbed by this incident, later calling it "the origin of my public career," for then and there he resolved to dedicate his life to the cause of the poor and the weak.

He entered Parliament in 1826, aged only twenty-five, and soon began his program of humanitarian reform, seeking to remedy some of the worst consequences of the Industrial Revolution. His unremitting labor continued for nearly sixty years, and the legislation for which he was largely responsible represents an astonishing achievement.

In 1842 the Coal Mines Act prohibited underground work in mines and collieries by women and girls and reduced the hours worked by boys. In 1845 the Lunacy Act secured the humane treatment of the insane and appointed fifteen "Commissioners in Lunacy," of which he was one for forty years. In 1847, 1850 and 1859 he piloted through Parliament the Ten Hours Factory Acts, which regulated working hours for women and children. He was the acknowledged leader of all this factory reform. In 1851 the Common Lodging House Act sought to end the unsanitary and overcrowded conditions of lodging houses, laid down acceptable standards and permitted local authorities to inspect and supervise them.

Even this list is far from complete. Ashley Cooper also founded the Ragged School Union and busied himself on behalf of boy chimney sweeps, flower girls, orphans, prostitutes, prisoners, handicapped people and crippled children. Although his parliamentary bills were several times defeated, he refused to give up. "I must persevere," his journal records.

What motivated him? To begin with, he believed and loved the gospel. "I am essentially, and from deep-rooted conviction," he wrote in his diary, ". . . an Evangelical of the Evangelicals." This means that in particular he emphasized "the divinity of Christ, his atoning sacrifice and his coming kingdom." And his good works of love and justice were the natural outflow of his faith.

During the 1830s, however, he became firmly and vitally convinced of the second coming of Christ. "It entered into all his thoughts and feelings," wrote Edwin Hodder; "it stimulated him in the midst of all his labours; it gave tone and colour to all his hopes for the future." For "there is no real remedy, he often said, for all this mass of misery but in the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. Why do we not plead for it every time we hear the clock strike?"

"I cannot tell you," Cooper once said to Hodder, his authorized biographer, "how it was that this subject first took hold upon me; it has been, as far as I can remember, a subject to which I have always held tenaciously. Belief in it has been a moving principle in my life; for I see everything going on in the world subordinate to this one great event."

It is not surprising, therefore, that Cooper's favorite text was the second from last verse in the Bible: "'Yes, I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus" (Rev 22:20). His lifelong diary, to which he committed his private thoughts, is sprinkled all through with this [same expression of pent-up longing]. It was a motto he had inscribed in Greek on the flaps of the envelopes he used every day. A few years before he died, he left instructions that Revelation 22:20 should be one of three texts engraved on his tombstone. And on his deathbed he kept muttering, "Come, Lord Jesus."

Anthony Ashley Cooper, seventh earl of Shaftesbury, died in 1885. So richly had he deserved the epithet "the poor man's earl" that tens of thousands of people, from all walks of life, lined the route taken by the cortege carrying his body from his home in Grosvenor Square to Westminster Abbey. There was a great outpouring of public grief, love and respect. Representatives of the homes, asylums, schools and societies that he had founded carried banners, on which were emblazoned sentences from Matthew 25: "I was an hungered and ye gave me meat," "I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink," "I was a stranger and ye took me in," "naked and ye clothed me," "I was sick, and ye visited me," "I was in prison, and ye came to me" (Mt 25:35-36 KJV). Even the pouring rain could not dampen their spirits.

"My Lords," exclaimed the duke of Argyll, in a political speech delivered soon afterward, "the social reforms of the past century have not been due to a political party: they have been due to the influence, the character and the perseverance of one man: I refer, of course, to Lord Shaftesbury." *The Times* also acknowledged him as a man who "changed the whole social condition of England."

And why? What had been his incentive? He tells us. Toward the end of his life he said, "I do not think that in the last forty years I have lived one conscious hour that was not influenced by the thought of our Lord's return."

If the living prospect of the Lord's return can change an entire society for the better, how much will it change your life and mine to reckon with it every day, even every hour of the day? How differently we will view our problems, how much more carefully we will speak of and to others, how much more resolute we will be in enduring opposition and remaining steadfast in trial! This

is what it means to live by faith: to behave as anyone ought to behave who knows that the Lord is near, is standing at the door!