

James 1:9-12 Crown of Life

I. Introduction

People of God, Imagine how incredibly difficult, and simultaneously bewildering it must have been for the new Jewish believers in Jesus, to be so suddenly at odds with their religious, political, and cultural leaders. The institutions and leaders they trusted for so long, the synagogues which they have attended their whole lives, the deep family connections, and the cultural heritage they shared with those who were now violently persecuting them. This must have left an incredible sense of confusion, frustration, and anger in them.

And I think we can begin to relate to them. For Christians in America, we have quickly gone from positive world, in which being a Christian was a net good, to negative world - where being a Christian is seen as a cultural and political negative.

For Jesus' first disciples, it was within the span of about 3 and half to 4 years that these Jewish believers went from having the benefits of being Israelites, and having the Temple and the Synagogue system on their side protecting them against Rome, to being actively against them.

Aaron Renn says that Negative World began for us around 10 years ago, in 2014 with the passing of Obergefell. But the intensity of the regime's hatred for Christians really began to manifest itself openly since 2016 when Trump became President, and even more so in 2020 after Biden stole the election.

Culturally we look around and we consider ourselves as pilgrims in a strange land. The country we once knew is no longer present. Tr

shared cultural heritage we once had with one another is no longer there. Symbols which once bound us together now are signs of our enmity. Being a conservative Christian is now seen as a grave threat to our nation and to “democracy.”

Jesus warned his disciples that by siding with Him and identifying themselves with His kingdom was going to get them in hot water with the authorities. And it is the same for us today. As the insanity of unbelief continues to take over the West, as the Anti-Christ system continues to find new ways to degrade the good creation, devalue the currency, destroy human life, vilify the church, attack faithful Christians, promote all manners of perversions, and punish law abiding citizens, the tendency for God’s people is going to be to get angry.

And you should be angry. But be angry and sin not, the Scripture says. James warns this new persecuted church that has quickly fond itself as political and religious dissidents against the temptation to respond to their negative world of persecution and trials and murders and cultural exile, with anger, violence, and quests for earthly power.

Instead, James urges patience, prayer, and adherence to Jesus' teachings on meekness, mercy, and loving one's enemies. By patiently enduring trials Christians gain wisdom that will ultimately lead them to reign with Christ. Their faithfulness and patience in the face of persecution is what will change the world. Not their strivings for political power and control against a system that is increasingly hostile to them.

II. Poor and Rich

In this section James develops this issue further by speaking of two sets of people: The lowly, poor brethren, who are the new persecuted believers in Jesus. And the rich, who are their wicked Jewish persecutors.

James writes to encourage the poor persecuted church telling them that days of the rich, wicked are numbered. God has promised a great reward for the poor righteous who faithfully endure persecutions even unto death.

III. Poor Glory in Exaltation

It is important to know that the temptation for the rich is to use their wealth and power to wickedly oppress the poor righteous. But the temptation of the poor is to covet the wealth and power of the rich. As Asaph says in Ps. 73:

*Truly God is good to Israel,
To such as are pure in heart.
²But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled;
My steps had nearly slipped.
³For I was envious of the boastful,
When I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*

And why was Asaph envious?

*⁵They are not in trouble as other men,
Nor are they plagued like other men.*

*¹²Behold, these are the ungodly,
Who are always at ease;
They increase in riches.*

Have you ever dreamed of having immense wealth and power, like George Soros, Elon Musk, or Jeff Bezos? It's tempting to think of the good we could do with such resources. But the reality is that those who wield great power, money, and influence often misuse it. They escape consequences for their actions, exploit others, and indulge in corruption without repercussions. Because the whole world is corrupted by riches.

It's easy to imagine that if the righteous had such influence, that we'd use it for good. But history shows that riches and power tend to corrupt.

Perhaps it's a blessing that God doesn't grant his people excessive wealth. Jesus teaches us to treasure heavenly riches over earthly possessions. Christians, typically not among the wealthiest, understand the dangers of wealth and power, as Jesus warned it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into Heaven. Prov. 30:7-9 says:

“Two things I ask of you, LORD; do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.

So let's not yearn too much for earthly wealth and power. Instead, let us remember what Jesus says in the Beatitudes "*Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.*"

a. Exaltation in Christ in Heaven Now

Thus, James tells the poor and lowly that they are to boast, not in riches, but in their exaltation. The Greek word for exaltation means height, and it is a reference to Heaven. Heaven is called "the highest of heights." So the lowly are to boast of heaven.

The first aspect of our Heavenly exaltation in which we are to boast is our current exalted position in Christ. Ephesians says that God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. God has raised us up in Christ and seated us with Him in the Heavenly places. God has adopted us as His sons, and therefore we are heirs of Heaven and Earth. God has richly lavished upon us His grace by redeeming us and forgiving us of all our sins in Christ and so we have communion with God. In Christ we have obtained an inheritance, and the very Holy Spirit of the Almighty God dwells in us. And the unsearchable riches of Christ's glory and love have been revealed to us, and in us.

And so as we consider the plight of God's poor persecuted church, as we consider our helplessness in the face of the rich and powerful wicked, we can endure it with joy because we have been exalted to the highest place in Heaven in Jesus Christ, the God Man.

b. Exaltation of Future Glory which awaits you in Heaven

Secondly, when we die, the glories of Heaven will be ours to experience and possess forever. *To live is Christ, and to die is gain.*

When we die, we will be promoted. In Heaven we will see Jesus Christ face to face. We will be with the patriarchs and prophets and saints and martyrs and all the holy angels, and we will have the fullness of never ending joy, in which each new day surpasses all others in glory. We will be delivered from all our sin, sickness, and sorrow. And we will have finally entered into God's rest.

The lowly believer, in order to steel himself against the sinful temptation to acquire worldly riches, and to wield worldly power and control in a worldly way, let him not cast his hopes on this world and its fading glory, but on the never fading and unsurpassable glory of the world to come, in Heaven.

c. "Exaltation" of the Cross Now

And the third exaltation in which the lowly poor persecuted believer must boast is in the exaltation of the cross.

"But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." Gal. 6:14

For only in this way will the believer acquire those heavenly riches which we have in Christ and waiting for us when we die. Just as Christ was exalted with glory and honor at His crucifixion; just as Christ was enthroned on the cross to the mocking and cursing of the people, so is it your exaltation to carry your cross with Christ as well, and to consider the scoffing, jeers, and insults of a dying world as the very applause of Heaven. There is no crown without the cross. And so, boast in the cross that God gives you to bear,

and be filled with unspeakable joy in your trials, for this is the pathway to glory.

IV. Rich glory in Humiliation

But James then tells the rich to boast in their humiliation. The rich, wicked Jewish oppressors would do well to consider that one day they are going to die. And all their riches and power and glory that they trust in now, are going to be stripped from them in a moment. On that day they will be humiliated. This is the greatest comfort to God's people.

As Job 20:4-5 says:

*“Do you not know this of old,
Since man was placed on earth,
⁵That the triumphing of the wicked is short,
And the joy of the hypocrite is but for a moment?”*

a. He will die and his glory and riches will be gone

James, says that the rich wicked are like the flower of the field. Just as everyone comes flocking to Pella to see the Tulips in all their glory, so do people look with envy and jealousy on the rich. But the petals fall off the flower after they have only bloomed for a few weeks. The time of their glory is short. So it is with the rich and powerful. They would do well to consider that and not boast in their earthly glory now, nor put their trust in it.

Ps. 37 is a wonderful Psalm which strengthens the hope of God's oppressed people by contrasting the shortness of the tyranny of the

wicked with the permanence of the inheritance of God's saints. Ps. 37 says:

*Do not fret because of evildoers,
Nor be envious of the workers of iniquity.
² For they shall soon be cut down like the grass,
And wither as the green herb.*

*Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him;
Do not fret because of him who prospers in his way,
Because of the man who brings wicked schemes to pass.
⁸ Cease from anger, and forsake wrath;
Do not fret—it only causes harm.*

*⁹ For evildoers shall be cut off;
But those who wait on the Lord,
They shall inherit the earth.
¹⁰ For yet a little while and the wicked shall be no more;
Indeed, you will look carefully for his place,
But it shall be no more.*

*¹¹ But the meek shall inherit the earth,
And shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace.*

*¹⁸ The Lord knows the days of the upright,
And their inheritance shall be forever.*

*¹⁹ They shall not be ashamed in the evil time,
And in the days of famine they shall be satisfied.*

*²⁰ But the wicked shall perish;
And the enemies of the Lord,
Like the splendor of the meadows, shall vanish.
Into smoke they shall vanish away.*

Rev. 18 also depicts the rich and powerful city of Jerusalem, the city which persecuted the prophets and apostles, and which killed Jesus, as having her riches and wealth stripped from her in a moment.

‘Alas, alas, that great city that was clothed in fine linen, purple, and scarlet, and adorned with gold and precious stones and pearls! ¹⁷ For in one hour such great riches came to nothing.’ Every shipmaster, all who travel by ship, sailors, and as many as trade on the sea, stood at a distance ¹⁸ and cried out when they saw the smoke of her burning, saying, ‘What is like this great city?’

¹⁹ “They threw dust on their heads and cried out, weeping and wailing, and saying, ‘Alas, alas, that great city, in which all who had ships on the sea became rich by her wealth! For in one hour she is made desolate.’

²⁰ “Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you holy apostles and prophets, for God has avenged you on her!”

That is what James is saying here in telling the rich to boast in their humiliation. God is going to strip the rich city of Jerusalem of all her riches and power, and influence, and He is going to avenge His saints. As the virgin Mary says in the Magnificat –

He has shown strength with His arm;

He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

⁵² He has put down the mighty from their thrones,

And exalted the lowly and meek.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things,

And the rich He has sent empty away.

And James is telling us the same thing today. The rich powerful people of the earth, those who have risen against the church, the people who seek to do us harm and see Christianity struck from the world, God will avenge us on them. God will remove them from their thrones of power. God will satisfy the poor and hungry.

So do not think that in order to preserve the Christian faith in the world, or even our lives and reputations, that we have to fight back against them in anger. Do not think that in order to defeat these evil people we are to fight as they fight. The meek shall inherit the earth. Those who wait on the Lord to act will be vindicated. *“Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, saith the Lord.”*

b. The rich will fade away in his pursuits

In fact, James even tells us how God is going to defeat them. He says that *“the rich man will fade away in the midst of his pursuits.”*

The very thing the enemies of the church are doing in order to secure for themselves more power and money and influence, will be their undoing. They will fall into their own traps. The rich Jews killed Jesus in order to keep the Romans from taking away their place, referring to the Temple. And what happened as a result? The Romans took away their temple, and the True Heavenly Temple of God was established instead.

Likewise, the persecutions which are meant to destroy the poor Christians, God actually uses to glorify us, and make us more like Jesus, and make us to reign with Christ as a result, and to establish the Church. As Rom. 8 says:

*“For Your sake we are killed all day long;
We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.”*

³⁷Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.

The rich wicked try to conquer the church through killing us and oppressing us, but their conquering only serves to make us conquerors. And they are the losers. But you can only understand that from the perspective of Heaven.

V. A Call to Endurance in the midst of persecution

a. Blessed is the Man

i. Beatitude – Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness...

And then we finally come to verse 12. Where James echoes the the Beatitudes regarding the Blessed Man. Jesus said,

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,
For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

¹¹Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. ¹²Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

James says,

¹² *Blessed is the man who endures trials; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.*

i. Jesus is the Man who endured

The blessed Man who endured trial, ultimately is Jesus. He is the one who embodied everything James is trying to teach the church. He worked righteousness, and was persecuted as a result. Thus he is the Blessed Man who was persecuted for righteousness sake, for His is the kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus joyfully endured the suffering, and the mockery, and the shame, and the slander, he like the sheep before the shearers was silent, he prayed for his enemies, he was mindful of God as he endured suffering while being treated unjustly. And in all this he gave us an example, and example of endurance.

And Peter says, for to this you have been called, because Jesus also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in His steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When reviled he did not revile in return; when he suffered he did not threaten, but he continued entrusting himself to Him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins on the tree so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. (1 Pet. 2:21-24).

As a result of this kind of patient, prayerful endurance under persecution, Jesus acquired the crown of life. He died, but he rose again from the dead. He is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God on High, ruling over all things in Heaven and Earth.

Do you see? We want money, and power, and riches to rule the world and to change it. But Jesus teaches that the way we ascend to

the throne to rule with him and to change the world is not in the same way the worldly rich do. We receive the crown of life through joyfully enduring suffering and persecution as Christ did, and we acquire the right to rule over the earth through being faithful unto death.

a. Crown of Life

ii. Stephanos – Crown

And we even have another example besides Jesus of one his followers being the blessed man who remained steadfast and patient under trial, and after standing the test received the crown of life. And that is Stephen, the first martyr of the Church.

And James is making a play on the word for crown here, which in Greek is the word ‘stephanos’ – Stephen. Stephen is the blessed man who stood for righteousness, preached Jesus, rebuked the evil rich wicked powers of his day, and as they were killing him for their hard heartedness, Stephen mimicked Jesus and prayed for God to forgive them, for they knew not what they did.

And for this Christ like action, of enduring to the end, of being willing to suffer and die for righteousness’ sake, and die in a righteous manner, Stephen was approved and given the crown of life. As Rev. 2:10 says: *Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.*

i. When he has been approved – Acts – Stephen sees Jesus standing at right hand of God in approval.

Now Christ is said everywhere in the NT to be **seated** at the right hand of God. But as Stephen is being stoned to death, he looks up to Heaven and sees Jesus **standing** at the Right Hand of God.

Stephen received His approval, as the Son of God gave him a standing ovation, applauding him and approving of his faithful endurance.

ii. This promised to those who love him

1. 1 Cor. 2:9

He willingly suffered at the hands of evil men, and did not return evil for evil, but entrusted himself to God. That is righteousness. That is Christ-likeness. That is the behavior that many in the world, and many worldly Christians consider weak. But that is the greatest act of faith that one could display. For this is how we attain the divine right to rule, by demonstrating that we love God in this way.

This is also the encouragement behind Paul's words in 1 Cor. 2:7-9

But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. ⁸None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹But, as it is written,

*“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the heart of man imagined,
what God has prepared for those who love him”–*

And for that kind of love for God, a love that is willing to be sinned against, rather than sin, a love that is willing to endure evil, than return evil for evil, a love for God that is willing to pray for those who hate you, and is willing and ready to entrust your vindication

to God and to eternity – that is the one who receives the crown of life. That is the one who when he dies, comes to life.

That is the one who when he has given up every last hope of acquiring earthly power and rule by dying at the hands of the rich, wicked rulers of the world, receives his approval and reward and is given the crown of life to reign with Christ in Heaven. For that is precisely how Christ attained the victory. That is how Christ attained the Crown of Life, and that is how Stephen acquired it as well.

In other words, dying is how we conquer.

2. Conquerors

This is the meaning behind Christ's words in the letters to church in Revelation 3, when he says: *The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.*

And again, he says, *“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.*

a. Rom. 8:36-37

The Apostle Paul likewise proved the point when he said in Rom. 8

*“For Your sake we are killed all day long;
We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.”*

Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.

b. Rev. 20 – Martyrs Reign with Christ 1000 years

And to drive this point home, what did John see in Rev. 20? A passage that is often debated about some future millennial kingdom on earth. But the passage is talking about the martyrs who conquered the Beast and the Anti-Christ by dying for Jesus, and who were given thrones to rule with Jesus from Heaven with Him.

⁴Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed. Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. ⁵The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. (The first resurrection refers to those who died as martyrs and were lifted up to reign with Christ in Heaven) ⁶Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection! Over such the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years.

CONCLUSION

In Conclusion, as we reflect on the wisdom of James and the lessons he imparts to the persecuted church, let us remember that enduring trials and persecution is part of God's refining process for us. James urges us not to be swayed by the allure of power, wealth, or retaliation, but to remain steadfast in our faith, trusting in God's promises.

The rich and powerful may seem invincible in this world, but their glory is fleeting. As James reminds us, they will fade away in the midst of their pursuits. In contrast, the lowly believer who endures persecution for the sake of righteousness will receive the crown of life promised by the Lord.

Let us, therefore, boast not in earthly riches or power, but in our exaltation in Christ both now and in the future glory that awaits us in Heaven. Let us follow the example of Jesus and Stephen, who endured suffering with grace and forgiveness, knowing that our ultimate victory lies in reigning with Christ for eternity.

May we all be encouraged to remain faithful even in the face of persecution, knowing that our suffering is not in vain. And let us fix our eyes not on the fleeting riches of this world, but on the eternal glory that awaits us in the presence of our Lord. For James reminds us that *God has chosen those who are poor in this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he promised to those who love Him.* (James 2:5). Amen.