



# Active Faith

*Studies in the Letter of James by Peter J. Blackburn*

## 5. Prayer that Works!

In the previous study we mentioned that unpopular word - **submission** - in particular the need to be submitted to God and to his will for all of our lives. The chapter ended with a warning against the arrogant assumptions we can make about our own plans.

Of all groups within society it is **the rich** who most readily make these assumptions - after all they are the ones most in control of the circumstances of their lives. Yet those circumstances will change!

But it is not only the rich who have to watch out for the coming judgment. The downtrodden and suffering also have to face the coming of the Judge. So all are called to **active prayer**. God's will is not something out there, imposed from afar on us. We have been reminded, "Draw near to God and he will draw near to you!" **Active faith** is a relationship and a lifestyle.

### Chapter 5

<sup>1</sup>Come now, rich people! Start weeping over the hardships about to come on you! <sup>2</sup>Your wealth has become rotten and your clothes moth-eaten! <sup>3</sup>Your gold and silver are covered with rust - a rust that will be a witness against you and eat into your flesh like fire! You have been storing up treasure in the last days! <sup>4</sup>Now look! You have dishonestly withheld pay from the workers who have reaped your fields - it cries out! And the cries of the harvesters have come to the ears of the Lord of hosts! <sup>5</sup>You have had this luxurious life of wantonness on earth, fattening your hearts in a day of slaughter! <sup>6</sup>You have condemned and murdered the righteous person - he hasn't resisted you!



<sup>7</sup>Therefore, brothers, keep on persevering until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, persevering over it until it receives the early and the late rain. <sup>8</sup>You must persevere too! Be resolved in your hearts, for the Lord's coming is at hand! <sup>9</sup>So, brothers, don't blame one another, so that you yourself will not be judged - and the Judge is even now standing before the doors! <sup>10</sup>As an example of suffering and perseverance, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the Lord's name. <sup>11</sup>See!

we call blessed the ones who have stood firm! You have heard of the Job's perseverance and have seen the Lord's purpose - the Lord is full of compassion and merciful.

<sup>12</sup>But above all, brothers, don't swear - either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath - let your "Yes" be yes and your "No" no, so that you will not fall under judgment.

<sup>13</sup>Is one of you going through trouble? Let him pray! Is someone in good spirits? Let him sing praises! <sup>14</sup>Is one of you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church so that they can pray over him and anoint him with olive oil in the Lord's name! <sup>15</sup>The prayer of faith will heal the sick - the Lord will raise him up! If he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. <sup>16</sup>Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The active prayer of the righteous person has much power! <sup>17</sup>Elijah was a person of similar nature to ours. He prayed earnestly that it wouldn't rain, and it didn't rain for three and a half years! <sup>18</sup>Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth sprouted with fruit!

<sup>19</sup>My brothers, if one of you strays from the truth and someone turns him back, <sup>20</sup>let him know that the one turning the sinner back from the straying of his way will save his soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.

## Coming Judgment

There seems to be a sudden change in vv.1-6. All at once *the last days* seem to be upon us and judgment inescapable! The *day of slaughter* (v.5) seems to be a direct reference to Jeremiah 12.3 where it speaks of the Lord's judgment. In other words - in view of the end of everything and the coming judgment, they have been living the wrong way altogether. *Storing up treasure* presumes that this life goes on and on.

Think of the words of Jesus, "*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also*" (Matthew 6.19-21). Building a relationship with God must be the top priority!

Coupled with this wrong presumption is their dishonesty and oppression. Here too they fail to take account of the coming judgment. Tasker makes the comment, "Neither here nor elsewhere in the New Testament are the rich denounced merely for being rich, but rather for yielding so readily to the temptations to which the rich are especially prone. The almost invariable

accompaniments of great wealth are a false sense of security and an insatiable love of power" (*ibid.*, p.109).

Vv.7-12 seem to turn towards the poorer believers. For them, too, it is important to realise that *the Lord's coming is at hand* (v.8). They are called to persevering faith even in the midst of oppression and suffering. *Don't blame one another, brothers* (v.9) reminds us of *don't speak against one other, brothers* (4.11) - the Judge himself is on the way! *He is full of compassion and merciful* (v.11) - yet out of wrong speech they too can *fall under judgment* (v.12).

- If there is to be a judgment, how should we then live?

## Active Prayer

This last comment takes us back to the theme of chapter 3 - what we say. Remember verses 9 and 10? *We use the same tongue to bless the Lord and Father - and to curse the people made in his likeness! Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth - and that, my brothers, should never be!*

Down-trodden? Troubled? Don't curse, pray! Everything going well? Then sing praises! In other words, our lives - good or bad - are to be lived out in relationship with God. But that's no "pie in the sky when you die" faith! God interacts with our lives and with his world - the physical world - to bring healing to the sick - *The active prayer of the righteous person has much power!* (v.16).

Notice that James seems to think that many of our troubles come about because of a breakdown in our faith. He doesn't say "all" but suggests that in many situations there is need for confession and forgiveness. In fact, this letter on **active faith** ends with a statement about straying *from the truth* into sin - such a one needs to be saved from death!

- How can prayer become a more active part of our lifestyle?