James 5:1-6 – Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure! Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you.

Context:

Chapter 5:1-6 is a continuation of James’ prophetic-like speech as he is challenging the readership in regard to their attitude and behavior.

Textual Analysis:

In order to continue our analysis of the Letter of James as a whole, it is important to point out the synthesis of this passage with the rest of the book. Normally this passage is seen as being disconnected from the rest of the letter. Some have used this passage in particular to demonstrate that the letter is filled with proverbial statements and there is no flow to the book. But even in the English translations the flow can be seen.

The following is a list of how this passage works with the rest of the letter:

1. “Come now” – same words as 4:13.
2. The content resembles that of the previous four sections (3:13-18; 4:1-10; 4:11-12; 4:13-16)
3. “όὖν” appears in 4:17 in the third of its five occasions (4:4, 7; 5:7, 16) and transitions to the application of the prophetic utterance.
4. There is a perpetual theme throughout the whole letter about focusing on riches, materialism, and selfishness in arrogance (1:10; 1:27; 2:1-7; 2:15-16; 4:13-16).
5. Similarity in terms
   a. Rich – 1:10-11; 2:5-6
   b. Weep – 4:9
   c. Miseries (Noun) – 4:9 (Verb)
   d. Put to death (Commit murder) – 2:11; 4:2

There is a question of audience that must also be addressed. To whom is James writing? I have nine commentaries and, if they address the question of audience, they all conclude that this is to non-believers who are rich or includes all the rich (believer and unbeliever alike). The reason that they come to this conclusion is the following:

1. Does not address brothers, but you who are rich.
2. There is no call for reform, only a strict warning
3. The rich in 2:1-7 seem to be outsiders, this is a concluding statement about them
4. The language seems to be that of condemnation
5. Believers would not do the things stated in this section

Let us evaluate these reasons point by point:

1. Does not address brothers, but you who are rich.
   - James 4:13 does not address brothers but “the one who says.”
   - Rich is not used in the same manner as we use it. This word means to have abundance or more than enough. The historical context is not that of three classes. There were those who had abundance and those who were poor. As stated last week, James is holding the entire group accountable for the culture of oppression within the church.

2. There is no call for reform only a strict warning
   - Reform is at the least implied but also verses 7-11 provide the required response – “οὖν” - therefore
   - The last days and the coming of the Lord were in view of the second coming not the rapture of the Church. Paul’s revelation of the mystery of the church was not revealed for another 20-30 years. In James’ estimation, the rich were putting themselves at risk of Kingdom judgment.

3. The rich in 2:1-7 seem to be outsiders, this is a concluding statement about them
   - When this section was evaluated, we determined that the use of rich and poor in Chapter 2 was not a positionally determining factor. Both are on display as ones who are being evangelized.
   - The topic is Chapter 2 is not a judgment upon the rich but an appeal to sensibility and not being partial. Why would you be partial to the rich and neglect the poor?
   - This section is a condemnation of the rich as a whole. Why would James appeal to the rich who are not saved? Why change the format? Since the indictment, prophetic utterance, and the appeal to return to God are present in the previous four sections, then the addressees would not change unless there is a verifiable indication by the author.

4. The language seems to be that of condemnation
   - We must keep in mind the language is that of prophetic utterance
   - Jeremiah 4:8; Joel 1:5
   - The pronouncement is to Jewish believers in a very Jewish manner in light of the day of the Lord. Even as the passage continues in verses 7-11, we see “The Judge is standing at the door,” and “Blessed are those who endure.” What about those who do not endure? The lessons from Matthew on the behavior that is expected to be able enter the kingdom can shed light. This will be discussed at a later date.

5. Believers would not do the things stated in this section
   - We saw this in 1st Corinthians. Not only are believers capable, in certain areas this kind of behavior was prevalent, problematic, and very destructive.
   - There is no indication that this passage is to unbelievers, pitting a believer-versus-the-rich paradigm. The letter indicates that this section, just like all sections, is to the Jewish believers in general and the to “rich” believers specifically in this passage.
The Epistle of James to the Twelve Tribes of the Diaspora

- Those who take this as a general “to the rich” portion of the letter must, at the very least, relate this to Israel and perhaps James is musing on eschatology concerning Israel.
- What is the ethic for unbelievers? Is it to reform, to not be greedy? No! The first responsibility unbelievers have is to believe—to become believers.

**Exegetical Analysis:**

The main point of this passage is to indict the population of believers who have used their riches as means for oppression. Here is what they have done:

1. They have withheld payment from those who labor for them
2. Lived a life of wanton pleasure
3. Condemned and murdered the just man

Here is the response from the Lord:

1. Their riches have eaten at them. The descriptive language once again points to being prophetic in nature. In the Hebrew Scriptures, this can be taken in eschatological terms or in general moral terms (Isaiah 50:9). Because the rest of the context indicates that the person has become morally corrupt, we understand that their riches have spoiled their moral character.
2. The warning is that in the last days you have stored up treasure. This is contrast to the Jesus’ teaching, “Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth” (Matthew 6:19-21).
3. The cries of those who have been cheated have reached the Lord of the Sabaoth. The Lord of Hosts (Armies) is a strong prophetic understanding that God is in opposition and ready to repay vengeance upon those who oppress. This name for God is used over 60 times in Isaiah, almost 70 times in Jeremiah, and over 80 times in the minor prophets. Remember that in James 4:4 the indictment is that they have loved the world and have placed themselves at enmity with God. It is a terrifying thing to be approached by God as His enemy.
4. You have fattened your hearts in the day of slaughter. As we have stated previously, James is not evaluating their situation in regard to the rapture. The next situation in the prophetic timeline as far as they know is the second coming of Jesus Christ and the possible entrance in the Kingdom.
   - Now that we know more about eschatology, these warnings are to be understood as if they are in the tribulation, preparing to enter the millennial reign where the tares will be sifted from the wheat.
   - The principles of these warnings are absolutely in effect.
   - We cannot ignore the prophetic and eschatological nature of this passage.
   - We must be careful to apply the virtue but not necessarily the full-scale impact of the warning

The response of this passage is found in verses 7-11. But, for now, we understand that those who have abundance in this world are to share with those in need. We have discussed this point often in James and it bears repeating again. Understand that money, property, goods, legacy, and anything that this world has to offer are not what will remain. It is not wrong to have these things; it is about our focus and the willingness (and activity) to share, helping, giving up of yourself for the benefit of others to the glory of God.
James 5:7-12 – Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door. As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful. But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath; but your yes is to be yes, and your no, no, so that you may not fall under judgment.

**Context:**

In response to the indictment of those who have plenty, there are direct mental attitudes to take on and actions to perform. The first word in verse 7, *therefore*, indicates an expected reaction from those who are rich and also from those who are oppressed.

**Exegetical Analysis:**

There is one word that is used twice that needs special attention. The command to *be patient* is “μακροθυμέω makrothumeō.” This is a compound word that combines “μακρός makros” and “θυμός thumos.” “μακρός makros” means long, long lasting, enduring, or far-reaching. “θυμός thumos” means passion, to well up, to boil, or fierceness. The combination indicates a person who has their passions under control. The verb is in the Aorist Active Imperative. An Aorist Imperative indicates an urgent action is required. This command also indicates that the readers lack patience. The verb is used another time in verse 7 describing the farmer being patient. In verse 10, the noun is used to personify the prophets.

I think *patience*, in this context, is misunderstood. The word *therefore* is a clue as to how this word is to be understood. The first surface context is understood from the perspective of the oppressed. They are not to call for judgment upon those who oppress them; they are to wait for the judgement of the Lord, especially since His return is near. The oppressed are to:

1. Wait for the coming of the Lord
2. Strengthen their hearts
3. They are not to complain
4. Take suffering and patience as a virtue
5. Understand and rely upon the compassion and mercy of the Lord

How does this relate to the ones who oppress, to the greedy rich? First, we must understand the word “μακροθυμέω makrothumeō” from the perspective of the Hebrew Christian.

My son, if thou come to serve the Lord, prepare thy soul for temptation. Set thy heart aright, and constantly endure, and make not haste in time of trouble. Cleave unto him, and depart not away, that
thou mayest be increased at thy last end. Whatsoever is brought upon thee take cheerfully, and be patient when thou art changed to a low estate. (Sirach 2:1-4) (James 1:10-11)

What is man, and whereto serveth he? what is his good, and what is his evil? The number of a man’s days at the most are an hundred years. As a drop of water unto the sea, and a gravelstone in comparison of the sand; so are a thousand years to the days of eternity. Therefore is God patient with them, and poureth forth his mercy upon them. (Sirach 18:8-11)

Many therefore have refused to lend for other men’s ill dealing, fearing to be defrauded. Yet have thou patience with a man in poor estate, and delay not to shew him mercy. Help the poor for the commandment’s sake, and turn him not away because of his poverty. Lose thy money for thy brother and thy friend, and let it not rust under a stone to be lost. Lay up thy treasure according to the commandments of the most High, and it shall bring thee more profit than gold. (Sirach 29:7-11)

One of the main attributes of God is that of long-suffering, patience. This attribute is in accordance with grace. God grants grace even when one does not deserve it. Though wronged a thousand times. God does not hold that against us.

In the Bible, both in the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the Greek, the principle of the rich being generous to the poor is well understood:

**Exodus 22:25-27** "If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, you are not to act as a creditor to him; you shall not charge him interest." "If you ever take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, you are to return it to him before the sun sets, for that is his only covering; it is his cloak for his body. What else shall he sleep in? And it shall come about that when he cries out to Me, I will hear him, for I am gracious.

**Deuteronomy 15:7-14** "If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks. "Beware that there is no base thought in your heart, saying, 'The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,' and your eye is hostile toward your poor brother, and you give him nothing; then he may cry to the LORD against you, and it will be a sin in you. "You shall generously give to him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all your undertakings. "For the poor will never cease to be in the land; therefore I command you, saying, 'You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land.' "If your kinsman, a Hebrew man or woman, is sold to you, then he shall serve you six years, but in the seventh year you shall set him free. "When you set him free, you shall not send him away empty-handed. "You shall furnish him liberally from your flock and from your threshing floor and from your wine vat; you shall give to him as the LORD your God has blessed you.

**Luke 3:10-11** And the crowds were questioning him, saying, "Then what shall we do?" And he would answer and say to them, "The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise."
1 Timothy 6:17-19 Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed.

So, we see the principle of giving and sharing to those who are need is well established. Does it matter if you have been defrauded? Does it matter if they have not paid back? The poor in their day had literally little to nothing. If someone is in need, truly in need, the ability to pay back should never be the question.

In James 4:11, we saw that the brother was using law (not the Law) to take his brother to court to get back. The supposition that I will put forward is this—the actions of the rich in James 5 are lawful. Pay has been withheld because they owe the landowner; they have imprisoned the poor man and that has led to his death because he could not repay a debt. In their own eyes and the eyes of the society (judicially) their actions are justifiable and maybe even expected.

Remember we also saw this in 1st Corinthians 6:6-8. In the eyes of the world, justice is served. When a wealthy believer holds in contempt a brother for wrongs, judging, court, not willing to help again because they are unable, God views that as a sin by the “rich” believer.

As far as principle goes, your personal resources are designed for:

1. Family provisions – 1 Timothy 5:8
2. Provision of the poor brethren – James 2:15-16
3. Provision for the poor outside – Galatians 2:10

With all of this in view, the exhortation to be patient for the rich is to be patient with the poor among them and be generous, not holding debt against them but providing for needs because the true treasure from the Lord is near.