

Epistle of Ya'akov ~ 5:1-6

Warning to the Rich

Well, we are on the downslope of our review of the **Epistle of Ya'akov**. Chapter 5 continues his previous thoughts from 4:13–17. They also convey **Yeshua's** thoughts recorded in Matthew 6:19–20. Commentaries that understand this condemnation to be directed at nonbelieving **Jews** (like 2:6–7) feed antisemitism by lending supposed biblical support to the miserly and oppressive **Jew's** caricature and misunderstand the prophetic task. In the **Tanakh**, Psalm 73 and Isaiah 5:8 are similarly critical of the arrogant rich without excluding them from **God's** people **Isra'el**, and there are other similar passages in the Prophets. This paragraph, which addresses *the rich* directly, must be understood as meant for wealthy **Believers**, who will read it, not for un-Believers, who won't. (However, its truth applies to them as well.) ¹

¹ Next, a word for the rich: weep and wail over the hardships coming upon you! ² Your riches have rotted, and your clothes have become moth-eaten; ³ your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat up your flesh like fire! This is the acharit-hayamim (the end of days), and you have been storing up wealth!

Exhortations to *weep and wail* was a graphic prophetic way of saying: *You will have reason to weep and wail*. Clothing was one of the primary signs of wealth in antiquity; many peasants had only one garment.

At the heart of pride is often a love for money - that is, materialism. **Ya'akov** isn't condemning money itself. Some of **God's** servants were wealthy (e.g., Abraham, Job), and money was not their problem. Condemned here is a mindset that turns **gold** into a god. **Ya'akov** addressed riches previously (1:10–11; 2:1–4), but in 5:1–6, he rebukes the *rich* people among his readers whose hearts were devoted to materialism. Theirs is a sin that transcends time. If you live in modern America, you are tempted to be a materialist. ²

⁴ Listen! The wages you have fraudulently withheld from the workers who mowed your fields are calling out against you, and the outcries of those who harvested have reached the ears of Adonai-Tzva'ot.

The wages you have fraudulently withheld compares to Leviticus 19:13, ***Do not oppress or rob your neighbor; specifically, you are not to keep back the wages of a hired worker all night until morning.*** (see also Deuteronomy 24:14–15 and Malachi 3:5.) *The outcries ... have reached the ears of Adonai-Tzva'ot*, like those of **Abel's** blood (Genesis 4:10) and the **Israelites** in Egypt (Exodus 3:7). **God** saw the sin in these cases and dealt with it; likewise, He will not ignore injustice toward workers.

The income absentee landlords received from agriculture was such that the wages they paid workers could not even begin to reflect the profits they accumulated. Although the rich supported public building projects (in return for attached inscriptions honoring them), they were far less inclined to pay sufficient wages to their workers. At least as early as the second century, **Jewish** teachers suggested that even failing to leave gleanings for the poor was robbing them (based on Lev. 19:9–10; 23:22; Deut. 24:19).

⁵ You have led a life of luxury and self-indulgence here on earth - in a time of slaughter, you have gone on eating to your heart's content. ⁶ You have condemned; you have murdered the innocent; they have not withstood you. ~ Ya'akov 5:1-6 (CJB)

The rich consumed much meat in a day of slaughter; once an animal was slaughtered, as much as possible was eaten at once because the rest could be preserved only by drying and salting. The meat was generally unavailable to the poor except during public festivals.

¹ Stern, D. H. (1996). Jewish New Testament Commentary.

² Evans, T. (2019). The Tony Evans Bible Commentary.

The picture here is of the rich being fattened like cattle for the day of their slaughter (see Jer. 12:3 & Amos 4:1–3). As often in the **Tanakh** (Amos 6:4–7), the sin in verse 5 is not exploitation per se (as in v. 4) but a lavish lifestyle while others go hungry or in need is.³

In our next post, we learn more from **Ya'akov** as we dig into what he says about **Patience in Suffering**.

³ Keener, C. S. (1993). The IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament (Jas 5:6).