

Undivided hope

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- [0 : 0 0] Now, I don't know how many of you have ever read *The Silver Chair* by the Christian writer C.S. Lewis. In the story, three main characters are captured by an evil witch who puts them in a sunless, underground world.
- Her aim is to make them forget that there is anything beyond that world they're currently in. And so when one of the characters speaks longingly about the sun in the world above, above ground, the witch asks, what is this sun you're speaking of?
- Do you mean anything by the word? Well, this main character replies, the sun is like the lamp hanging in the room, only greater and brighter.
- It gives light to the whole world and hangs in the sky. Hangs from what? The witch laughs. You see, when you try to think out clearly what this sun might be, you cannot tell me.
- You can only tell me that it is like the lamp. Your sun is a dream. And there is nothing in that dream that is not copied from the lamp. The lamp is the real thing.
- [1 : 1 6] Your sun is just a fairy tale, a children's story. And then she begins to say to them, hypnotically, there never was any world but mine.
- And they begin to repeat after her. They are falling under her spell. Well, that's just a story, but Lewis was making a serious point.
- He was pointing out how easy it is for us to fall under the spell of something called naturalism. Naturalism is just a fancy way of referring to a certain way of thinking.
- It's the way of thinking that says, this world is all there is. There never was any world except this world, the world that I can see, I can hear, I can touch.
- This world is all there is. That's the world view of many urban, modern people today, of course. But even Christians can fall under the spell of naturalism.
- [2 : 2 0] In theory, we say, no, no, no, no, of course we believe this world is not all there is. We believe in God and heaven and hell. But often, God and heaven and hell remain theoretical, abstract concepts up there.
- Little to do with us down here. The only time those concepts up there might meet with our lives down here will be on a Sunday when we gather in church and we take part formally in certain rituals like singing to God, praying to God, taking the Lord's Supper, and sitting down to hear God's Word like now.
- But otherwise, God up there doesn't touch my day-to-day life down here. So we become naturalists in practice.
- But today, Pastor James is going to deal with this way of thinking. He wants to help us resist falling under the spell of naturalism, of thinking that this world is all there is.
- Instead, he wants to open our eyes again to the greatest spiritual realities that we inhabit. He wants to remind us of the centrality of God in all that we do.
- [3 : 5 0] And in so doing, to confront and to reshape the way we live our day-to-day lives. He wants to reshape our mindsets.

And he does so by saying three things to us in today's passage. Here's the first thing James wants to say to us. Number one, don't plan your life as if there's no God.

Don't plan your life as if there's no God. That's in verses 13 to 17. Pastor James begins by reflecting on the everyday business of life.

During this time, the economy was picking up. There was increasing commercial activity, and plenty of people wanted a slice of the growing pie. A good number of Jews in particular left their homes for the big cities, hoping to make it big.

It would have been just like someone leaving Syrian or Sri Aman for Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, wanting to make the most of opportunities that might come their way.

[5 : 02] So verse 13 would have been a familiar scenario for his hearers. Now listen, you who say, today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business, and make money.

That's what many of them were in fact doing. These were the enterprising ones. The merchants, the entrepreneurs, the visionaries, busy analysing the market, noticing where there were needs, and trying to fill the gaps.

They were people who were simply trying to make it in life. But actually, that's us too, isn't it? Maybe not in the same way.

I'm certainly not the entrepreneurial type. You probably wouldn't want me to help you start a business. But we all have dreams. Whether it's running an F&B operation, or starting up an NGO to look after the environment, or going into the arts and culture scene and making a contribution, or becoming the best teacher in the nation.

We all have dreams. We all have dreams for ourselves, for our careers, our families, our children, our futures.

[6 : 30] We want to make it in life, however we define that. And so we carefully plan and diligently work.

Sure, some of us are more big picture kind of people, with a grand vision of what we want. And some of us are more micromanagers, with attention to detail.

But regardless, we know that if we want to make it, we need to have some idea of where we are going, and how we're going to get there.

And so we sit down, and we work out our budgets, how much insurance to pay, what sort of schooling would be the most advantageous for our kids, how we can keep up with personal development, and self-improvement.

When it comes to making it in life, we plan. But James now issues a challenge. Now listen, he says.

[7 : 39] But what is he challenging? Is he challenging the need to plan, per se? Not quite. The Bible isn't against planning.

Proverbs 21, verse 5, it should appear on the screen, says, The plans of the diligent lead to profit, as surely as haste leads to poverty. Proverbs 24, verse 27, says, Put your outdoor work in order, and get your fields ready.

After that, build your house. There's nothing wrong with planning. Is he challenging ambition, then? Well, not quite either.

The Bible has room for godly ambition. Paul says in Romans, chapter 15, verse 20, It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known.

In 2 Corinthians, chapter 5, verse 9, he expresses another ambition of his. So we make it our goal to please him, that's God, whether we are at home in the body, or away from it.

[8 : 55] So planning or ambition is not the issue here. Here's what Pastor James is challenging. Planning as if there's no God.

Confidently plotting out our future without any reference to God. Making arrangements as if God doesn't exist. Look back again to verse 13.

There's a strong note of confidence there, isn't there? I decide where to go. I decide how much time I will spend there.

I determine what my action plan is. And I certainly know what my bottom line is to make money, to gain profit.

There are no ifs and buts at all. And actually, there's no God either. God is nowhere in the picture.

[9 : 58] He's certainly not the bottom line. This is a picture of striking self-sufficiency. That's made clear in verse 16 where James describes what's happening here in the NIV 2011 as their arrogant schemes.

And Pastor James now offers two reasons why planning without God is such a bad idea. Firstly, it's a bad idea because of who we are.

Who are we? Second half of verse 14. You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. We are simply mist.

Think of vaping here. You all know what vaping is. Those e-cigarettes. You take one puff, a bit of vapour comes out and then three seconds later it's all gone.

That's what we are. Mist. Vapour. We can be here this morning but gone by the afternoon.

[11 : 08] We've certainly had that starkly shown to us by the news this week. Haven't we? Think of the Thai billionaire owner of Leicester City Football Club.

Last Saturday after watching the game he got onto the helicopter as he does every week. Except this time tragically the helicopter spun out of control and all the passengers were killed.

Think of that Lion Air flight making its way from one city to the next. That tin mining capital where money was to be made. Who on board would have imagined that morning that a brand new plane would crash into the sea?

as James says in verse 14 we do not even know what will happen tomorrow. We don't even know what will happen in an hour's time.

We can plan but we cannot control our lives because we simply don't know we'll miss. we don't know if we lose our jobs.

[12 : 24] We don't know if our health will go downwards. We don't know if our kids will go wayward. We have the best laid plans but we don't know the things that can mess it up.

So planning without God is a bad idea because of who we are. We're missed. And the second reason is a bad idea is just the other side of the same coin.

It's a bad idea because we're not God and yet so often we act as though we are. You see we just said that we have so little knowledge if any of our future.

We don't even have much control over our present. And yet so often we plan and we act as if we do. I'm going to go get straight A's in SPM get that JPA scholarship to go to Australia find my future husband and wife there get a good job by 22 get a good life by 25.

We have a timeline of our entire life. But James says verse 16 that that's being foolishly arrogant and more than that it's actually evil.

[13 : 48] Because we've overreached ourselves. We've put ourselves in the position of God. We've made all our plans revolve around us rather than have our lives revolve around God.

God. And so James counsels us don't forget the larger spiritual realities we live in.

Instead of playing God he says put ourselves in the hands of God verse 15 God will live and do this or that.

We might not have exhaustive knowledge of the future. We don't have total control over our lives but God does. The psalmist says time and time again that he is the one who sends the rain the thunder and the lightning.

The smallest details of nature are under his control. The falling of a sparrow, the numbers of hair on your head. He determines what nation will dwell in which territory which king or government will rise and fall.

[15 : 10] And he decided that wicked people would take the life of his own beloved son so that sinners like you and me would live.

He knows it all. He wills it all. And his will is always and eternally good. For though we are but mist, and yet in his son, Jesus, God decided before eternity to bring us into eternity with him, to permanently dwell with him.

Think of the best holiday you've had. Some of you have just come back from holidays, I know. You remember the feeling of how you don't want it to end, you never wanted it to end?

Well, that's what we get when we trust in Christ, an eternal, joyous honeymoon with the groom. But only if we put our lives in the hands of Jesus.

God has a sweet relief. Life is hard, life is uncertain, but when we know our plans are in God's hands, well, we can rest.

[16 : 32] We make decisions, but we know he has the final say. And remember what kind of God he is, the one who is in control of everything and who sent his son, the Lord Jesus, for us.

And because he is this kind of God, we can trust him. And so we find freedom to act. We can say, if it is the Lord's will, we will do this or that.

Because we know nothing lies outside his sovereign influence and everything he does is soaked through with goodness. And for our part, we simply keep living and planning in line with God's will.

How do we know God's will? Simple. We don't need to look for signs and omens. We don't need to guess. We find it all in the scriptures. Where God has given us explicit commands to obey, we must follow.

And where God has not given us explicit instructions, we pray for wisdom, we seek counsel, and we have freedom to decide.

[17 : 45] The words of verse 17 gives us one such guideline. If anyone then knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them.

And so we know we need to do good. But what's the good we ought to do? Well, the scriptures tell us. It's to be humble and submit to God.

That's what we heard last week. It's to be more Christ-like. It's to love our neighbor. It's to make disciples who make disciples. It's to eat and drink and use our gifts all to the glory of God.

Those are all things mentioned in the scriptures. And those are to be our ultimate ambitions. Let's turn now to the second thing Pastor James wants to say to us.

Number two. Don't pursue worldly riches at all costs. Don't pursue worldly riches at all costs. That's chapter 5, verses 1 to 6.

[18 : 50] Pastor James now turns his attention to one group in particular. The rich. And they're the unbelieving rich. Pastor James doesn't ever call this group brothers or sisters.

Indeed, he sounds a prophetic note against them. Sounding just like Amos, in fact, for those of you who were here earlier this year for that sermon series. And so if we're believers today, in this section, he's not directly addressing us.

But it seems as if Pastor James deliberately wants us to overhear his words to them. Why? Because he wants believers to hear so that we will know the true position of such people.

They look like they have it all in this world. But once we factor in the world to come, well, it's a different picture. And when we know their true position, well, we wouldn't be tempted to envy them.

And we wouldn't want to follow in their footsteps. So even as he speaks directly to this group, Pastor James is still indirectly drawing lessons for us as believers.

[20 : 08] So what exactly was the issue here? Well, we find it at the end of verse 3. You have hoarded wealth in the last days.

Literally, in the original language that James was writing in, in the Greek, it says you have stored up treasures for yourselves. These people were living as if this world was all there is.

Since there's nothing beyond this world, I better get all I can now. That seems to be their attitude. My treasure is all in this world.

Pastor James, however, thinks of this as a spectacularly foolish investment. Look at verse 2. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes.

James is basically saying, in vivid imagery, that such worldly riches don't last. There's depreciation, there's deterioration, there's decay.

[21 : 14] Even the moths will get at it eventually. In fact, verse 3, your gold and silver are corroded. Wait a minute, we might say, gold and silver doesn't rust.

Maybe James isn't such a good scientist. But James is making a larger point here. He's saying, yes, if this world is all there is, then gold and silver would be immensely valuable.

But, if this world is not all there is, then gold or silver are of no value to you on that final day, if you have neglected Jesus and his words.

It's the equivalent of having rusted through material. You might not see it now, but on that final day, verse 3 again, their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire.

They actually condemn you. So what's really happening here is this. We think we are storing up treasure when we're hoarding stuff for ourselves.

[22 : 32] But what we're really doing is storing up judgment for ourselves. We accumulate stuff in search of happiness, but we find ultimately it leads to the misery of judgment.

Instead, look at verse 1. Now listen, you rich people, weep and weep because of the misery that is coming on you. That's the misery of judgment.

And so James says, don't make such foolish investments. Don't invest in Enron stocks if you know they're going to crash. It might not be literal gold or silver we are longing after, but something similar.

We need to think carefully about what we're investing in. Perhaps it's making a name for ourselves in a particular field. Perhaps it's reaching a certain lifestyle similar to our peers.

Perhaps it's simply compiling an insurance portfolio that makes us feel secure. But I'm sure James would echo the words of Jesus who says, Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and vermin destroy and where thieves break in and steal.

[23 : 56] But store up for yourselves treasure in heaven where moths and vermin do not destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

How do we know though if we're pursuing worldly riches at all costs? I think a good indicator is when we've stopped loving others because loving usually involves giving, not self-indulging.

The unbelieving rich during James' day took this quite far. Just look at verses 4 to 6. Look, the wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you.

The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourself in the day of slaughter.

You have condemned and murdered the innocent one who was not opposing you. Notice that they failed to treat their workers fairly.

[25 : 06] Perhaps they made all sorts of excuses. There's no money left in the budget. You've all failed to hit your KPIs. Perhaps they exploited certain legal loopholes.

Right, alright, you guys all need to work overtime and no, there's no need to pay you extra. What? You want more leave? Stop being so lazy. And they did all this while indulging themselves, going to expensive restaurants and staying in five-star hotels.

You see, in their pursuit of worldly riches, they failed to treat others as fellow human beings. They wanted just that bit more.

And it didn't matter how they got it, even if it meant others suffered or even died. Again, no God in the picture. It was just about stuffing themselves and making sure they enjoyed this present world.

But as James notes, ironically, by treating others almost like animals, they themselves have become animals.

[26 : 18] Verse 5, fattening themselves for the day of slaughter. Because this world is not all there is, judgment is coming.

And so that's a good test for us. We might not fall into the same exact transgressions as these unbelieving rich. But we know that we've gone wrong when we find ourselves so invested in something at the cost of loving others.

And so we're spending so much time at work just for that extra paycheck such that time with immediate family and church family is completely sacrificed.

Something's gone wrong. When we're obsessing about how much, how about to squeeze just that bit much more from a particular investment. But not about deepening our knowledge of God or caring for your brother or sister in Christ.

Something's gone wrong. When you find yourself getting very irritable at others when conversation turns to money matters. Something's gone wrong. Is that you?

[27 : 30] Are you pursuing worldly riches as if this world is all there is? Are you storing up treasure in the wrong place? Well, it's time to change your investment strategy.

Invest in the kingdom instead. Just like planning is not wrong in itself and so saving is not wrong in itself.

But has that desire for money become a form of idolatry? Well, put it now in the hands of our loving Father instead.

Find your peace not in the amount of money you have in your savings account but in the prince of peace instead. Find your joy not in money but in the Messiah instead.

And again, remember who this Messiah is. That innocent righteous one condemned and led to the cross to be slaughtered and murdered.

[28 : 36] one who knows what it's like to be at the receiving end of the indulgent rich and one who chose the path of poverty not of luxury so that you and I might receive spiritual riches of knowing our eternal God.

Well, that takes us to our third and final thing that James has to say to us this morning and that's in chapter 5 verses 7 to 12. Number 3 Do patiently and deal for the judge is at the door.

Pastor James now once again addresses the Christians directly. He goes back to calling them brothers and sisters. You can see that in verse 10 or in verse 7 for example. And the big thing he wants to say to them is to be patient.

You can see that in verses 7 and 8. Be patient then brothers and sisters until the Lord's coming or verse 8 you to be patient and stand firm because the Lord's coming is near.

Pastor James is sensitive to his audience. He knows full well that there might be people listening in who are nowhere near being rich. In fact they might be struggling to make ends meet.

[30 : 08] They are suffering perhaps at the hands of those who oppress them those people in verses 1 to 6. And James says a word of encouragement to them.

Be patient for this world is not all there is. He then makes an agricultural observation verse 7.

See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. Be like the farmer James says.

The farmer in Palestine knows that they need both the rain just before it's time to sow the seed and the rain just before the harvest to endure a good crop.

But he can't bring the rain about. He can only wait for it patiently trusting it will come. So it is with the Christian.

[31 : 11] We wait patiently trusting Jesus will come back and for justice to be done. And we wait trusting for the Lord to provide in the meantime.

And as a little aside I think this image is also a good reminder for those of us who have activist mindsets. We are absolutely right to want to make a difference in this world.

It is part of reflecting God's character and loving our neighbour. But we need to remember that no amount of social action can ever bring about utopia in this world.

But that shouldn't bring us to despair because this world is not all there is. There is a world to come that the Lord himself will usher in.

That world will be one where wrongs would be made right and bad things come to an end. And so we must wait. We too need to be patient and not get frustrated when our efforts to transform the world don't bear fruit.

[32 : 17] That's not our ultimate job. We don't get to transform the world in the ultimate sense. But our job is to bear witness to this kingdom to come by living out its values and showing glimpses of it wherever we can.

We have to wait. And that also means not grumbling. Verse 9. Grumbling is the very opposite of patience.

It's an indicator of impatience. And it's easy to let go of our tongues, isn't it, when we're feeling the pressure. But part of patiently enduring is to use our tongues instead to testify to the wrongs of this world, to name evil for what it is, and to the alternative kingdom found in Jesus instead.

We need to keep telling the truth. That's the gist of verse 12. And that's exactly what the prophets did in verse 10. Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

Notice that James draws attention to their speech in particular. They were not passive, but they kept speaking the word of the Lord, even in the face of suffering.

[33 : 55] Think of Amos again, who gave up a secure, well-paying job as a shepherd to speak an unpopular message to Israel. Think of Jeremiah, mocked by kings, who preferred the prosperity gospel messages that the other false prophets of his day were speaking.

All would be well, they kept saying, only for Jerusalem to fall. But all these prophets persevered. And that's what we need to do, James says.

We need to remind people of the sovereign Lord who is judged, but has provided the way of rescue in his son. God will take the example of Job from the Old Testament, verse 11.

As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. Now, Job's not the most obvious example, because when we think of Job, we think about his complaints.

Isn't he grumbling and showing impatience? But the point is that Job, even while complaining, never gave up on God.

[35 : 14] Even when riches and happiness had long left him, even when injustice was being done to him, he never stopped going to God. And the Lord showed that in the end, it was all worth it.

He revealed to Job at the end of the book of Job, himself, and that was enough. When we go to the Lord, there is a good ending, as there is for Job.

So that good ending might only fully come about when Jesus comes back. But he's the one to go to. So three things James says to us today.

Don't plan your life as if there's no God. Don't pursue worldly riches at all costs. Do patiently and dear, for the judge is at the door.

For this world is not all there is. There is a larger spiritual reality. And the good news is that at the centre of those spiritual realities stands the Lord who is full of compassion and mercy.

[36 : 26] His plans for you are the best plans there could possibly be, even if you can't see it. His riches for us might not be the material health and wealth now, but a better world than we could ever imagine at the end.

His judgement will fall on those who do wrong, and his care will be with those, even today, who find day-to-day living a struggle.

in the silver chair, just when the witch looks like she succeeded in convincing the characters that this underground world is all there is, one of the main characters, Pado Glam, stands up and makes a speech.

He says this, Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours is the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one. And that's a funny thing, when you come to think of it.

If you're right, we're just babies making up a game. And Pado Glam's point is that we might as well give up now if this world is all there is.

[37 : 39] But he doesn't believe that's true. And neither do we, because we believe in the resurrection of Jesus, which tells us there is a world other than that we can see, a world where Jesus reigns, death is defeated, good wins.

Don't be a practical naturalist, but place your undivided hope on Jesus. Let's pray. Let's pray.