Expectations of James, the Lord's brother

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Bible Version
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(Note: All underlining of Scripture quotations for emphasis has been added by the author.)

James 5:1-9 (ESV):

1 *Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you.*
2 *Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten.*
3 *Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days.*
4 *Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.*
5 *You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.*
6 *You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.*

7 *Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains.*
8 *You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.*
9 *Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door.*

Author and Recipients

The James who composed this epistle was the Lord's half-brother.
Paul explicitly calls him "the Lord's brother" in Galatians 1:19.
So well-known was this James that Jude, in his epistle, introduces himself as a "brother of James" (Jude 1:1).
Both James and Jude were subsequent, natural sons of Mary and Joseph (Mt 13:55; Mk 6:3).[1]
James was presumably converted when Jesus appeared to him after his resurrection (1Cor 15:7; cf. Jn 7:5).
James became one of the principal leaders of the church in Jerusalem (Ac 12:17; 21:18; Gal 2:9).
As such he took a leading role, along with Peter, in the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15).
Though not one of the original Twelve, he may have been regarded as an apostle (Gal 1:19).

[1] Jesus was Mary's firstborn child (Lk 2:7); other sons and daughters were subsequently born to her and Joseph (Mt 13:55-56). There is no truth whatsoever to the claim that Mary was a perpetual virgin who had no other children.

James was highly regarded by the citizens of Jerusalem. He was known as "James the Just" on account of his godly life and character.
According to Josephus, James was martyred in the year 62.[2]
James demonstrates a firsthand knowledge of Jesus' teaching — especially with the so-called Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5 – 7).[3]

James is writing to "the twelve tribes in the Dispersion" (Jas 1:1).
"The Dispersion" might refer to those Jews who lived outside of Judaea (Jn 7:35).
Jews were particularly numerous in Alexandria, Syrian Antioch, Mesopotamia, Ephesus, Thessalonica, and Rome (cf. Ac 2:5, 9-11). Indeed, far more Jews resided outside the Holy Land than within.
But perhaps James is writing to Jewish believers closer to home and with whom he was more familiar.
It is possible that his intended audience were believers from the early Jerusalem church who, after Stephen's martyrdom, were scattered as far as Cyprus, Phoenicia, and Syrian Antioch (see Acts 8:1; 11:19).
James appears to have been familiar with their ongoing trials and oppression.
As leader of the church in Jerusalem, James would then be writing as their pastor, seeking to both instruct and encourage his dispersed flock in the face of their continuing difficulties.

James writes to those who believed in one God and who had Abraham as their forefather (Jas 2:19, 21).
His many references to the law confirm that he is addressing Jews (Jas 1:25; 2:8-12; 4:11-12).
And he refers to their church meeting as a "synagogue" (Jas 2:2).

James is writing mostly to <u>believing</u> Jews, whom he calls "firstfruits" (Jas 1:18).
They were the first of a great spiritual harvest for God.
We meet these firstfruits in Revelation as well (Rev 14:4) — the 144,000 faithful first-century Jews whom God seals with a mark to exempt them from coming judgment (Rev 7:1-8; 14:1-5; cf. Eze 9:4-6).[4]
But note, James also addresses unbelievers — here in 5:1-6. Potentially he is doing so in 2:19 as well.

These Jewish believers were undergoing formidable trials (Jas 1:2).
Their trials included economic exploitation and being dragged into court (Jas 2:6).
Most were poor; they felt insignificant and marginalized. And so, they would try to impress any rich or prominent person who visited their assembly (Jas 2:1ff.).
Their trials led to anxiety, which in turn made them grumble against and malign each other (Jas 3:9; 4:11; 5:9).
Much wisdom was needed if they were to withstand their trials (Jas 1:5) and live peaceably (Jas 3:13-18).

[2] Josephus states that James was killed during the interval between the governorships of Festus and Albinus. With a lapse in Roman oversight, the high priest Ananus seized the opportunity to murder James. Ananus convened the Sanhedrin, which condemned James and some other Christians on the charge of being transgressors of the law and had them executed by stoning (*Antiquities* 20.9.1). James was highly regarded by the Jerusalemites, and anger over his death eventually led to Ananus being deposed as high priest. Other less credible early writers claim that James was stoned and beaten to death with a club after first surviving being thrown down from a temple tower by the religious leaders.
[3] See James 1:22 (cf. Mt 7:21); 2:5 (cf. Mt 5:3; Lk 6:20); 3:12 (cf. Mt 7:16); 4:11-12 (cf. Mt 7:1); 5:2 (cf. Mt 6:19); 5:12 (cf. Mt 5:34-37).
[4] It is noteworthy that first-century Jewish believers came from all 12 Israelite tribes, as James also indicates in his opening words. Amongst the early believers were many priests from the tribe of Levi (Ac 6:7; cf. 4:36). Anna was from the tribe of Asher (Lk 2:36). In this we see the fulfillment of the many Old Testament prophecies that anticipate the final reunion of both Israel and Judah under God's chosen (Davidic) king. See Isaiah 11:12-13; Jeremiah 3:18; 23:5-6; 30:3, 9; 31:27, 31; 50:4-5; Ezekiel 37:15-25; Hosea 1:11; 3:5.

Because the letter's primary concern is with Jewish believers, most authors regard James as having been written quite early — before many Gentiles had turned to the Lord and prior to the Jerusalem Council of AD 49.
But as the long-term leader of the Jerusalem church, James' focus was always going to be on the Jews.
So, his letter may have been written somewhat later, in the 50s, or even in the early 60s before his martyrdom.
At times he seems to be "correcting" Paul's gospel emphasis on justification by faith, which would seemingly require a later date.

The Judaizers, whom Paul opposed, evidently emanated from James' own circle in Jerusalem (Ac 15:1; Gal 2:12).
Perhaps James' emphasis on the need to keep the whole of God's law (cf. Jas 2:10-11) was misunderstood as a requirement for Gentile converts to keep some of its ceremonial stipulations.[5]
But James was no legalist: he refers to the "law of liberty" (Jas 1:25; 2:12) and to the "royal law" of love for one's neighbor (Jas 2:8). God's law comes to us not through Moses but through Christ; we obey it out of gratitude and through the power of his Spirit.
Paul himself would fully agree with James that true faith is evidenced by good works (cf. Gal 5:6b).
James was largely responsible for the Jerusalem Council's decision to write to the Gentiles, instructing them to abstain from a few basics (Ac 15:19-20). His wise advice was unanimously agreed to by the Council.
To all intents, James at the Council sided with Paul and against the Judaizers.

The Rich

Who are the wealthy people that James castigates in 5:1-6?
Answer: They were Jewish landowners who employed laborers to mow their fields (5:4).
We can be certain of this because, outside of Jewish circles, that type of work was performed by unremunerated slaves.
Those James censures were less than honest. Quite possibly they had gained some of their wealth by fraud.
They appear to have had no qualms about withholding payment from their hired workers.

It's likely James is addressing here a situation closer to home — within Judaea itself.
After all, it is obvious that he's referring to the coming war with Rome (66-70 AD):

- Certain "miseries" were about to befall these rich people (5:1).
- Israel's "last days" had arrived (5:3).
- Their "day of slaughter" was imminent (5:5).

These wealthy landowners were the Jewish aristocracy, many of whom were Sadducees.[6]
This aristocracy came to an end in the Jewish-Roman War of 66-70 AD.

[5] The Judaizers sought to impose on Gentile converts the so-called Jewish "identity markers" — circumcision, Sabbath observance, and food laws. Paul's message of "the cross" — his insistence that anyone who trusts in Jesus is fully and finally accepted by God — was offensive to these Judaizers because it nullified Jewish privilege and effort (Gal 5:11).
[6] The Sadducees were the wealthy Jewish aristocrats of Jerusalem. Some of them owned large tracts of rural land.
The high priests and chief priests (who controlled the temple and maintained its rituals) were almost exclusively Sadducees.
However, some of the ordinary priests were Pharisees. The Sadducees constituted a majority on the Sanhedrin.
The Pharisees, a minority on the Sanhedrin, were nevertheless influential in its decisions owing to their popularity with the people.
See Acts 4:1; 5:17; 23:6.

They lost their landholdings, and many also lost their lives — most likely at the hands of Jewish Zealots who regarded them as traitors for supporting the Roman government.[7]
But Jews in foreign lands also suffered loss of life and property. In late 66 AD some 50,000 Jews in Alexandria were massacred,[8] and 10,000 more were massacred in Damascus.[9]

First-century Jewish enmity to the Gospel

We need to appreciate the situation faced by Jewish believers in Jesus.
In Judaea and beyond, unbelieving Jews opposed the gospel and persecuted their Christian brothers.
They consistently opposed the apostolic preaching.[10] Active persecution took place in Judea itself (1Thes 2:14).
The author of the book of Hebrews (writing to Jewish believers) refers to public insults, imprisonment, and the confiscation of their property (Heb 10:32-34; 13:3).
And John, writing to churches in the province of Asia (in cities with large resident Jewish populations) refers to persecution from the "synagogue of Satan" (Rev 2:9; 3:9). Those in Smyrna had to endure tribulation, poverty, and slander (Rev 2:9). Persecution took the form of social ostracism and economic boycotts and, probably, false accusations before the Roman courts.

Jesus had himself earlier warned about the persecutions and hardships that would immediately precede his return (Mt 10:17ff.; cf. vs. 23). Widespread persecution of his "brothers" would result in hunger and lack of clothing and imprisonment (Mt 25:31ff.; cf. Mt 24:9; Heb 13:3).[11]

Recall that James had earlier described the rich as those who were oppressing and dragging his readers into court, and "who blaspheme the honorable name by which [they] were called" (Jas 2:6-7).
One can only surmise as to why they were dragging their fellow Jews into court.
But what about their "blaspheming"?
Apparently, here as elsewhere, those who believed were called "Christians" (cf. Ac 11:26; 26:28; 1Pet 4:16).
The reason for this is obvious: Jesus was the object of their faith and worship.
He was the "Lord Jesus Christ of glory" (Jas 2:1, literal Greek text).
Their opponents ridiculed and maligned their beliefs, denying Jesus' deity and messiahship. In so doing they were blaspheming against the Son of God.[12]

James further accuses these oppressors of murder:
You have condemned and have put to death <u>the just</u> [man]; he does not resist you.
(James 5:6, literal Greek text).
Such was their fanaticism and animosity! Moreover, their action was wholly unprovoked.
In writing this James seems to anticipate his own martyrdom at the hands of Ananus.[13]

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[7] The Sadducees' status and wealth led to their supporting the *status quo* and appeasement with the Roman authorities. They often acted as go-betweens with the Romans. All this made them hateful to the populace.
With the loss of their temple and city in AD 70, the Sadducees as a group ceased to exist.
[8] See: https://www.livius.org/sources/content/pogrom-in-alexandria.
[9] See: https://www.josephus.org/warChronology3.htm#ethnic.
[10] See Acts 4:1-21; 5:17-40; 6:9 – 8:3; 9:23, 29; 13:45, 50; 14:2, 19; 17:5, 13; 2 Corinthians 11:24; 1 Thessalonians 2:15-16.
[11] Jesus' "brothers" are his <u>disciples</u>: "one of the least of these my brothers" in Matthew 25:40 corresponds with "one of these little ones … [who] is a disciple" in Matthew 10:42. Jesus identifies with his followers, no matter how insignificant (Mt 18:5-6; Ac 9:4).
[12] Recall how the apostle Paul, prior to his conversion, had tried to compel Christians to deny and blaspheme their Lord (Ac 26:11).
[13] As aforementioned, James was himself known as "James the Just."

Jesus' Parousia

James exhorts his readers to be patient in view of Jesus' imminent return (James 5:7-9):

> [7] *Be patient, therefore, brothers, <u>until the coming of the Lord</u>. …*
> [8] *You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for <u>the coming of the Lord is at hand</u>.*
> [9] *Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, <u>the Judge is standing at the door</u>.*

It's clear that James expected Jesus to return in the near future.
He twice employs the Greek term *parousia*, translated "coming" (5:7-8).
That is to say, James is referring to Jesus' one and only Second Coming.
In view of its nearness, his readers were to be patient and not grumble.[14]

There is no way that James' words can be applied to some yet-future coming of the Lord.
He is comforting first-century Jewish believers.
And we today are eavesdropping on someone else's mail!
(That's not to say that we can't draw principles for our own time.)

So, what about Jesus' parousia?
Parousia means "arrival and ongoing presence".
We should recall Jesus' own promises: some to whom he spoke would live to see his coming on the clouds as Judge (Mt 16:27-28; 24:30, 34); they would see God's kingdom "come with power" (Mk 9:1).
Thus, the King would return both to <u>judge his enemies</u> and to <u>dwell with his people</u>.
Revelation shows that fulfillment: Jesus was coming "soon", on the clouds, as Judge (Rev 1:7; 3:11; 22:7, 12, 20).
His rule over the nations would be manifested through his judgments (Rev 11:15-18).

As Revelation 21 – 22 makes clear, believers post-70 AD live in the New Jerusalem.
This is our great privilege under the New Covenant — to live in the city and in God's presence (Heb 12:22-23).
Both Father and Son are enthroned therein (Rev 22:3).
We serve before him as priests in his temple-city (Rev 1:6; 5:10; 7:15; 22:3; cf. Rev 7:15).
John saw the city's descent (Rev 21:2, 10); as well as in heaven, "Jerusalem" is now also on earth.
In AD 70 believers were gathered into Jerusalem and into God's presence — a gathering foretold by Jesus and anticipated by the early Church (Mt 24:31 [cf. Mt 23:37]; 2Thes 2:1).
God's presence with his people fulfills numerous Old Testament promises (Rev 21:3; cf. Lev 26:11-12; Eze 37:27; 48:35; Zec 2:10; etc.). And it fulfills Jesus' own promises to return.

[14] Grumbling under trials and towards fellow believers would result in judgment at Christ's parousia. Conversely, a positive response to trials would lead to spiritual growth which would be rewarded (Jas 1:2-4, 12).

Relief from Persecution

According to James, Jesus at his parousia would bring relief for his suffering people.
And here, James is in complete agreement with Jesus, Paul, and John:

- Jesus tied his return to the fall of Jerusalem (Mt 24:15-20; Lk 21:20-24), which took place in AD 70.
  His return would result in the deliverance and collective "redemption" of his people (Lk 21:28).
- Paul declared that at Jesus' coming the Thessalonians would gain relief from their persecutors (2Thes 1:7).
- John in Revelation shows Jesus coming "soon" to judge their persecutors:
  The Beast's demise (Rev 19:20) represents the end of Nero and his inquisition (in June 68 AD).
  The Harlot's demise (Revelation 18) portrays the fall of Jerusalem (in August/September 70 AD).
  With Jerusalem judged, God's true people would be finally vindicated:

  > *Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who claim to be Jews and are not, but lie — I will make them come and bow down before you and acknowledge that I have loved you.*
  > (Revelation 3:9, my translation.)

  John's readers were to "hold fast" their confession and not deny their Lord as they awaited his return (Rev 2:25; 3:11; cf. 2:13).

The book of Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians who were being tempted to abandon their faith and revert to the comfort and safety of institutional Judaism. To "come home", as it were.
It was probably written to believers in Judaea itself.
We've already noted its references to persecution.
Like the book of James, it also anticipates coming judgment:

- Believing Jews could see signs of the coming judgment on their nation and city (Heb 10:25).
- God was about to bring covenant wrath on his people (Heb 10:30; cf. Dt 32:35-36).
- Jesus was coming very soon (Heb 10:37).
- Those who "shrink back" would be destroyed; those persevering in their faith would be saved (Heb 10:39).

The Sadducees lost everything in the Jewish War; many also lost their lives. As a group, they ceased to exist.
But at the War's onset, the Christians of Jerusalem and Judea heeded Jesus' warnings and fled to the safety of Pella, a town beyond the Jordan. After the War, some appear to have returned to Jerusalem.

After exhorting his readers to patiently wait for Jesus' parousia, James points to the prophets and to Job as examples of perseverance under trial (Jas 5:10-11). He follows with a call to prayerfulness (Jas 5:13-18).

James concludes his letter by urging his readers to watch out for and to try to restore those who might be wandering from the truth — those not living in obedience to the word of truth (cf. Jas 1:18-25).
Restoration will result in such a person's forgiveness and deliverance from spiritual death (Jas 5:19-20).