

# Weep *and* Howl!



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *James 5:1–6, Ps. 73:3–19, 1 Sam. 25:2–11, Lev. 19:13, Luke 16:19–31, Matt. 5:39.*

**Memory Text:** “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (*Matthew 6:21*).

The worldwide popularity of the television show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* suggests that many people vicariously enjoy the rags-to-riches fantasy and probably hope it could happen to them someday.

But wealth isn't all that many believe it to be. Studies suggest that increasing income follows the law of diminishing returns: beyond allowing people to live comfortably, more possessions do not buy more happiness. Meaningful relationships, job satisfaction, and a purposeful life usually make a greater contribution to one's happiness than does wealth. The best things are freely given, such as loving words, a smile, a listening ear, simple kindnesses, acceptance, respect, a sympathetic touch, and genuine friendship.

Even more precious are the gifts given by God: faith, hope, wisdom, patience, love, contentment, and many other blessings that come through His Spirit's presence in our lives. The irony is that, while many Christians would agree with these sentiments, their daily living suggests that selfishness often has the upper hand. As we'll see this week, greed is a big mistake, one fraught with horrendous consequences.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 6.

## Justice Will Be Done!

Chapter 5 of James begins with a bang: “Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you!” (*James 5:1, NKJV*). No doubt, that would have gotten his readers’ attention.

In James 1:10, 11, he reminded the rich of the impermanence of wealth. Here, in chapter 5, he urges those who stubbornly hold on to it to “weep and howl.” It is as if their impending judgment is even now being poured out. The vivid description continues throughout our passage for this week, bringing to mind the divine retribution for the wicked excess that characterizes the period just prior to Christ’s return (*see Luke 17:27–29; 2 Tim. 3:1, 2; Rev. 18:3, 7*). A similar attitude permeates God’s last-day church (*Rev. 3:17*). Interestingly, the Greek word translated as “miseries” in James 5:1 comes from the same root used to describe Laodicea as “wretched” in Revelation 3:17.

**There is so much injustice in the world, especially economic injustice. Sometimes it is so hard to understand why some people get rich exploiting the poor and, worse, why they seem to get away with it! Read Psalm 73:3–19. What hope is found in these verses regarding this perennial problem?**

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Throughout the books of the Old Testament prophets, we find a concern for justice and the promise that God will act to set things right. But this persistent and settled sense of hope did not seem to make the uncomfortable and perplexing period of waiting for God’s intervention any easier. For instance, writing at a time of widespread apostasy among God’s people, when Babylon, swelling with pride, celebrated its power and prosperity, the prophet Habakkuk peppered God with pointed questions (*see Hab. 1:2–4, 13, 14*). God’s short answer was to trust in Him and wait a little longer (*Hab. 2:2–4*). And the prophet did just that (*see Hab. 3:17, 18*).

**What injustices cause you to simmer and burn inside with anger and outrage? (And there is so much more going on that you don’t even know about!) Though, of course, we should do what we can to alleviate injustice, how can we learn to rest in the promise that, somehow, when it’s all over, God’s justice will be done?**

## When Wealth Becomes Worthless

**Read** James 5:2, 3. What warning is James giving here? Though his words are quite strong, what kind of wealth is he talking about? What’s the basic message?

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Rotting wealth, moth-eaten clothing, and even silver and gold rusting—these are images for us to consider soberly as our planet spins blissfully on, faster and faster toward its demise.

The world’s economic situation always seems to be going from one crisis to another; even the “good” times, when they come, rarely last and are always followed by a downturn. Any semblance of economic stability and tranquility that the global marketplace might offer is fleeting and largely imaginary. Discontent and instability grows as the disparity between rich and poor widens. Such was the situation when James wrote that the poor were growing increasingly desperate and the rich more intolerant of the plight of the destitute.

**Consider** the following individuals and describe the effect wealth (or the lack of it) had on them:

1. **Nabal** (*1 Sam. 25:2–11*) \_\_\_\_\_

2. **Hezekiah** (*2 Kings 20:12–19*) \_\_\_\_\_

3. **Peter** (*Acts 3:1–10*) \_\_\_\_\_

Sooner or later, worldly wealth loses its luster for all of us. We learn its limitations and maybe even its dark side. Money has its place; the problem is when people put it in the wrong place.

James says money will be “a witness against” those who misuse it (*James 5:3*). Though he gives this warning in an end-time context, the point should be clear: how we use our money matters. The image of flesh-consuming fire is meant to wake us up to the seriousness of the choices we are making with our money. Are we heaping up treasure that will ultimately be burned up, or are we saving for eternity? (*See Luke 12:33, 34.*)

**Think carefully about your attitude toward money and how it affects your relationships. What does this say about how you are using it?**

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## Cries of the Poor

Reading through James, we may notice that several different categories of wealthy people are mentioned, including rich merchants who will be cut down in the midst of their pursuits (*James 1:11*), business people who sue to protect their investments (*James 2:6*), and agricultural landholders who have withheld wages from their laborers (*James 5:4*). These verses describe the rich negatively based on their past behavior, present attitude, and future punishment. These people have essentially “heaped up treasure” (*vs. 3, NKJV*) at the expense of the poor.

**“Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out”** (*vs. 4, NASB*). Compare *Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:14, 15; Jer. 22:13*. **What important principle is seen here, not just in the immediate contexts but in general in regard to how we deal with others?**

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In Israel in Bible times, as soon as wages were paid, many, if not most, of the workers used these earnings to buy food to feed their families. Withholding wages often meant the family had to go hungry. Thus, it was a serious matter that James was addressing here.

No wonder, then, that James spoke so strongly against those who held back wages from those who worked for them. It’s bad enough to defraud anyone of anything, but for someone already rich to hoard wealth by stealing from the poor is a sin, not just against the poor but a sin against heaven itself. And, as James writes, it will be dealt with in due time!

“Riches bring with them great responsibilities. To obtain wealth by unjust dealing, by overreaching in trade, by oppressing the widow and the fatherless, or by hoarding up riches and neglecting the wants of the needy, will eventually bring the just retribution described by the inspired apostle: ‘Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you.’”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2, p. 682.

**What are your dealings with others when it comes to money? What do those dealings say about your Christianity and about how much you reflect the character of Christ?**

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## Fat and Happy (for Now)

**“You have lived on the earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter”** (*James 5:5, ESV; compare Ezek. 16:49, Amos 4:1*). **What do these passages link to luxurious indulgence?**

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In the ancient world, the notion prevailed that there was a fixed amount of wealth, meaning that if the wealth of some people increased, the wealth of others had to decrease. In other words, the rich can get richer only by making the poor poorer. “Creating” wealth without adversely affecting the wealth of others, however, seems to be a relatively modern idea. Some even argue that, as the rich get richer, they can help make the poor richer too. On the other hand, considering the competition among developed and developing nations for increasingly scarcer resources, the limitations of wealth creation can seem more pressing. Hence, the issue of wealth inequality still rages today.

One of the most famous stories of Jesus dealing with issues of inequality is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (*see Luke 16:19–31*). At the time of Jesus, most people were lucky to have two garments instead of just one and happy if they feasted once a year. By contrast, the rich man in the story “was clothed in purple and fine linen” (the most expensive kind of garments) “and who feasted sumptuously every day” (*vs. 19, ESV*). Poor Lazarus, despite being carried to the gate of the rich man’s house, had to beg for the few crumbs he received.

Contrary to popular opinion, the real focus of the parable is this life, not the afterlife. In fact, the original Greek makes no mention of “heaven” and “hell” at all. Both the rich man and Lazarus are depicted in the same place (*vs. 23*)—the grave (*hadēs*). The chasm separating them symbolizes the fact that after a person dies, his or her eternal destiny is fixed. Therefore, how we treat people in this life (as described in “Moses and the prophets,” *vss. 29, 31, NKJV*) is extremely important. There is no future life in which we can make up for what we failed to do in this one: “He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?” (*1 John 4:20, NKJV*).

**What regretful things have you done that, though you might be able to “make up” for now, you won’t be able to make up for them later?**

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## Blame the Victim

When someone has done wrong, the natural tendency is to try to escape responsibility. Often people try to do this by transferring the responsibility to someone else—including the person who has been wronged. Murderers excuse themselves by pleading self-defense or blaming their upbringing. By saying they were enticed, sexual abusers blame the victim. Husbands and wives who get divorced typically blame the other for the failed marriage. Those guilty of killing the martyrs of the Christian faith blamed the martyrs by accusing them of heresy. Indeed, Jesus warned His disciples that “ ‘the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service’ ” (*John 16:2, NKJV*). In fact, we believe that James, too, was killed for his faith.

In light of this, the words in James 5:6 carry even more weight:

**“Ye have condemned and killed the just; and he doth not resist you.” How many times have you condemned others only to realize later that you were really the one who was wrong? Think especially about the last phrase of this verse. Does this mean that we should just let people walk all over us? On the other hand, how many quarrels have you had that would never have happened if you had put up no resistance? What does Jesus mean by “turning the other cheek” (*Matt. 5:39*)? How are we on a practical level to do this (or is the problem that we want to be “practical” about something that, in and of itself, isn’t really supposed to be practical)?**

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As we have seen, James has quite a bit to say about the rich and the poor. It should be kept in mind, though, that James never condemns the rich simply because they are rich. It is their *attitudes and actions* that matter to God. Similarly, the bare fact of being economically poor does not in itself endear a person to God. It is the “poor *in spirit*” and “rich *in faith*” who will be “heirs of the kingdom” (*Matt. 5:3, James 2:5, NKJV*). These inner qualities may have no relation to our particular economic circumstances. But then again, they may. Those who are “rich, and increased with goods” (*Rev. 3:17*) may be more needy spiritually than they think. God warned Israel to beware lest after they entered the land and became prosperous they should forget that all the good things they enjoyed came from Him, including the “power to get wealth” (*Deut. 8:11–18*).

**Further Study:** “Money has great value, because it can do great good. In the hands of God’s children it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, and clothing for the naked. It is a defense for the oppressed, and a means of help to the sick. But money is of no more value than sand, only as it is put to use in providing for the necessities of life, in blessing others, and advancing the cause of Christ.

“Hoarded wealth is not merely useless, it is a curse. In this life it is a snare to the soul, drawing the affections away from the heavenly treasure. . . .

“He who realizes that his money is a talent from God will use it economically, and will feel it a duty to save that he may give.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 351, 352.

### Discussion Questions:

❶ Consider the following statements: “The rich rules over the poor, and the borrower is the slave of the lender” (*Prov. 22:7, ESV*). “Many poor families are poor because they spend their money as soon as they receive it. . . .

“When one becomes involved in debt, he is in one of Satan’s nets, which he sets for souls.”—Ellen G. White, *The Adventist Home*, p. 392. Is helping people to get out of debt or to avoid getting into debt a part of “preach[ing] the gospel to the poor”? (*Luke 4:18*). Why, or why not?

❷ How do we really know whether money serves us or we serve it? See *Luke 16:10–13*.

❸ Economic disparity is everywhere. Some people have two, three, even four or more luxurious homes while others are happy to scrounge up a few pieces of wood and cobble them into a shelter. And what about those who have become obese by stuffing themselves while there are children all over the world going to bed hungry? Some argue that by taking from the rich we can give more to the poor. Others argue that as the rich get richer, they can help lift the poor out of poverty. How do we work, as Christians, to help alleviate the problem of extreme poverty? What things should we do to help, and what things *shouldn’t* we do?

## Trail of Death: Part 1

JOEL SANDOVAL

Joel Sandoval grew up in a Seventh-day Adventist home, but his life was not transformed by God's grace. As a teen, he resented the restrictions that the church represented. At age 15 he dropped out of church and joined a gang. He quickly became involved in organized crime, drugs, and spiritism. He had his body tattooed with symbols of the devil and began smoking marijuana. Soon he moved to hard drugs, such as cocaine.

Joel's parents allowed him to live at home, hoping that he would see the error of his ways. But when he was high on drugs, he often destroyed things in the house and terrified his mother. When the drugs wore off, Joel became depressed. One time he even tried to commit suicide. In spite of his parents' constant prayers and offers of help, Joel was convinced that no one loved him.

He made fun of his parents and others who invited him to church. Joel hated them for what they stood for; he hated the church; he hated God. In spite of his abuse, his parents and church members continued to pray for him and remind him of God's unfailing love. His mother was convinced that someday he would return to God and the church.

One night Joel was supposed to join his gang in a battle with another gang. A voice seemed to warn him not to go out that night. He remained home. Later he learned that his best friend had been killed during the fight. Joel realized that the warning voice he had heard was the voice of God. It had saved his life.

As he thought about the past few months, Joel realized that God had been speaking to him, telling him that the life he was leading was wrong. He began to cry, for he saw no way out of his drug-infested life. He began attending church again, but when members welcomed him, he thought they were staring at him. He felt like an outsider and stopped attending.

Joel decided to leave the country. When he told his mother, she cried. Before he left she pressed a small book into his hand. "Please, take this," she begged. It was a New Testament. And in spite of his feelings about religion, Joel asked her to pray for him.

Joel and five other young men left Honduras, heading for Mexico. They passed through Guatemala and crossed into Mexico. But early one morning they found themselves surrounded by an angry mob who were brandishing knives and guns. The youths realized that these men intended to kill them. The previous day someone had stolen merchandise from a local business, and the mob was convinced that the six youths were the thieves. Spewing death threats, the locals locked the youths in a house, then circled the house with their guns and knives in hand.

Frightened, the boys watched as the locals prepared a noose to hang them. Some swore; others sobbed. Joel thought about how he had disappointed his family and God. He pulled out the New Testament that his mother had given him and began reading.

*(continued)*