

## Why Does James tell us to “Mourn and Weep”?

### **Introduction**

One of the items that Scripture makes abundantly clear is that if we follow God, we will be **blessed**. Probably the most famous passage which states that fact appears in Matthew chapter 5 – at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount:

#### **Matthew 5:1-12 (ESV):**

5 Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.

<sup>2</sup> And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

<sup>3</sup> “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup> “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

<sup>5</sup> “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup> “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

<sup>7</sup> “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

<sup>8</sup> “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

<sup>9</sup> “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

<sup>10</sup> “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>11</sup> “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

The Greek word that is used for “blessed” in the above passage is *makarios*. The meaning of that word is basically “happy”, or “fortunate”. So, the above passage tells us that if we practice the listed characteristics (i.e., being meek, merciful, peacemakers, etc) then we will become *happy*. Even if we mourn, our sadness will turn to joy.

There are *many* similar passages, which tell us that followers of God will be blessed. Here is one example of a similar passage, from the Old Testament. That passage occurs in Deuteronomy chapter 28:

#### **Deuteronomy 28:1-9 (ESV):**

28 “And if you faithfully obey the voice of the Lord your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. <sup>2</sup> And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the Lord your God. <sup>3</sup> Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. <sup>4</sup> Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your cattle, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. <sup>5</sup> Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. <sup>6</sup> Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.

<sup>7</sup> “The Lord will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you. They shall come out against you one way and flee before you seven ways. <sup>8</sup> The Lord will command the blessing on you in your barns and in all that you undertake. And he will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. <sup>9</sup> The Lord will establish you as a people holy to himself, as he has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in his ways.

Once again, that passage tells people that they will become “happy”, or “fortunate”, **if** they follow God.

Finally, in both the Old and New Testaments, Scripture promises that in the Kingdom of God, everyone will be happy:

**Isaiah 25:6-9 (ESV):**

<sup>6</sup> On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples  
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,  
of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.

<sup>7</sup> And he will swallow up on this mountain  
the covering that is cast over all peoples,  
the veil that is spread over all nations.

<sup>8</sup> He will swallow up death forever;  
and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces,  
and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth,  
for the Lord has spoken.

<sup>9</sup> It will be said on that day,  
“Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us.  
This is the Lord; we have waited for him;  
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

**Revelation 21:1-4 (ESV):**

21 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. <sup>4</sup> He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

**A perplexing verse**

All of the above passages promise happiness for people who follow God. So, let’s take a look at *another* passage which exhorts people to follow God. The passage in question is located in James chapter 4. Verses 7 and 8 of that passage read as follows:

**James 4:7-8 (ESV):**

<sup>7</sup> Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. <sup>8</sup> Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

So far, this passage appears to be *somewhat* similar to passages listed above. Basically, those verses state that if we resist the devil, he will flee from us, and if we draw close to God, He will draw close to us. Those are both very positive results, of course; but they do not state anything specific about our becoming “happy” or not.

Now, take a look at verse 9:

### **James 4:9 (ESV):**

<sup>9</sup> Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.

At first glance, that particular verse appears quite confusing. It appears to state that if we follow God, then we will not be happy at all. In fact, that verse tells us that whatever happiness we do have should be turned to *grief*!

So, what is going on here? Why does James tell us that we should become *sad*, when there are so many other examples in Scripture of followers of God becoming *happy*?

### **The need for repentance**

Whenever one is trying to find meaning in a “difficult” verse, it is quite useful to examine the *context* of the verse in question. In other words, it is helpful to take a look at the text surrounding the verse in question – especially the verses immediately *preceding* it.

With that in mind, here is the context of James 4:9:

### **James 4:1-10 (ESV):**

<sup>4</sup> What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? <sup>2</sup> You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. <sup>3</sup> You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. <sup>4</sup> You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. <sup>5</sup> Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns jealously over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”? <sup>6</sup> But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” <sup>7</sup> Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. <sup>8</sup> Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. <sup>9</sup> Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. <sup>10</sup> Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

The context of this passage tells us that people are in need of *repentance*. In other words, James is telling people that they need to *turn away* from their sinful behavior – and to turn *towards* God.

The reason why this is important is because in Scripture, repentance is associated with *feeling bad* about one’s sins. In other words, repentance does not only involve turning away from future sin – it also involves feeling sorry for the sins that one has *already* committed.

Here are two famous examples of repentance in Scripture. First, the book of Jonah describes the repentance of the people of Nineveh. Basically, the people of Nineveh had been committing such grievous sins, that God was preparing to *destroy* the entire city – similar to the way He destroyed Sodom. However, God first sent Jonah, to *warn* the city about the impending destruction. Here is the response of the people of Nineveh, when they heard Jonah’s warning:

### **Jonah 3:6-10 (ESV):**

<sup>6</sup> The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. <sup>7</sup> And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, <sup>8</sup> but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. <sup>9</sup> Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish."

<sup>10</sup> When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

Basically, the people of Nineveh did not just stop committing *new* sins, and then go on their merry way. Instead, they put on sackcloth, sat in ashes, and fasted – in order to demonstrate that they were sorry for the sins that had already committed. In other words, this implies that the people *felt bad* about what they had done.

Another example of repentance is that of King David. David committed adultery with Bathsheba; and when she was found to be pregnant, David then arranged for Bathsheba's husband Uriah to be killed.

God eventually sent the prophet Nathan to expose David's sins to everyone. David was sincerely repentant after that; in fact, one of the Psalms – Psalm 51 – contains a prayer that David made to God, asking for forgiveness. Here is an excerpt from that Psalm:

**Psalms 51:1-3,7-8,14-17 (ESV):**

51 Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.

<sup>2</sup> Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin!

<sup>3</sup> For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.

<sup>7</sup> Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

<sup>8</sup> Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.

<sup>14</sup> Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,  
O God of my salvation,  
and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.

<sup>15</sup> O Lord, open my lips,  
and my mouth will declare your praise.

<sup>16</sup> For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;  
you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.

<sup>17</sup> The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Since David is asking God to “let him hear joy and gladness”, that indicates that David was **not** feeling joyous or glad at that time. In addition, David notes that God wants us to have a “broken and contrite heart” when we repent – and of course, having a broken heart indicates that one is *sad* – not happy.

### **Repentance is not a “one-time event”**

There is another important item to note, about James chapter 4. Basically, all of the sins that are listed there are in the **present tense** – not the past tense.

For example, the passage states “your passions are at war within you” – as opposed to “your passions were at war within you”. Similarly, the passage states “you covet and cannot obtain”, rather than “you coveted and could not obtain”.

Also note is that James wrote this letter to people who were *already* trying to follow God - i.e., James was writing to fellow believers.

So, chapter 4 tells us that people *continue* to commit sins – even *after* they have begun to follow God. As it turns out, the book of Ecclesiastes states that fact explicitly:

#### **Ecclesiastes 7:20 (ESV):**

<sup>20</sup> Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.

In other words, *no one* completely avoids sin – not even a man like King David, who was described as “a man after God’s own heart”.

Interestingly, there are some Christian denominations which believe that Christians can completely avoid sin. Basically, those denominations believe that once a person becomes a Christian, he gains the ability to *completely stop sinning*, due to the fact that the Holy Spirit now lives in him.

So, let’s see what Scripture has to say, about the belief that Christians can *completely* avoid sin. As it turns out, a very famous Christian – the apostle Paul – addressed that exact topic. Consider this excerpt from Romans chapter 7:

#### **Romans 7:15,18-19,21-24 (ESV):**

<sup>15</sup> For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

<sup>18</sup> For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. <sup>19</sup> For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

<sup>21</sup> So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. <sup>22</sup> For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, <sup>23</sup> but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. <sup>24</sup> Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

Paul tells us that he has the *desire* to do what is right – i.e., to avoid sin – but he does **not have the ability** to do so. Basically, due to the sinful nature of our mortal bodies, it is not possible for anyone – not even a faithful apostle like Paul – to completely avoid sin.

The passage above is reminiscent of Matthew 26:36-46, which contains the account of the disciples in Gethsemane, on the night Jesus was arrested. Jesus asked the disciples to stay awake, while he prayed. However, the disciples ended up falling asleep, because their bodies were so tired. In other words, the disciples *wanted* to follow Jesus' instructions, but their *bodies* did not allow them to do so. (That passage contains the famous phrase “the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak”.)

As a result, it certainly appears that even Christians do not have the ability to completely avoid sin. In fact, Paul appears to reiterate that point, earlier in Romans:

**Romans 3:10-18 (ESV):**

<sup>10</sup> as it is written:

“None is righteous, no, not one;

<sup>11</sup> no one understands;

no one seeks for God.

<sup>12</sup> All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;

no one does good,

not even one.”

<sup>13</sup> “Their throat is an open grave;

they use their tongues to deceive.”

“The venom of asps is under their lips.”

<sup>14</sup> “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”

<sup>15</sup> “Their feet are swift to shed blood;

<sup>16</sup> in their paths are ruin and misery,

<sup>17</sup> and the way of peace they have not known.”

<sup>18</sup> “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

In other words, no one is completely righteous – that is, no one *completely* avoids sin. (Paul was paraphrasing Psalms 14 and 53 in the above passage.)

So, since we all continue to sin, that means that we will need to continue to repent of our sins. In other words, it appears that repentance is not something that is just done *once*, and then forgotten about. Instead, repentance should be done on a *continuing* basis – i.e., as much as possible, we should repent after each time that we sin.

**Conclusion**

From all of the above information, it appears that James chapter 4 is giving us the following admonition:

“Don’t get too comfortable with yourselves, because all of us continue to commit sins.”

In other words, we need to be very careful to avoid falling into the trap of thinking that we, ourselves, are righteous. Instead, we need to realize that we continue to sin, even after becoming Christians. That, in turn, means that we need to continue to repent of our sins – and repentance involves *feeling bad* about the sins we have committed.

Of course, I don't think that James is telling us that we should remain in a permanent state of sadness and grief. In fact, most of the time, followers of God will be much *happier* overall than they would have been otherwise – as noted in the introduction. James is simply reminding us of the need to continue to repent, whenever we sin. Once we do that, we will end up becoming happier.

To sum up, the following passage looks to be very relevant, to this overall topic:

**Luke 18:9-14 (ESV):**

<sup>9</sup> He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: <sup>10</sup>“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup>The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ <sup>13</sup>But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ <sup>14</sup> I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”