

James 4:7-10

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[0 : 00] Our passage today ends with a heartwarming and thrilling promise. He will lift you up.

There in verse 10 of James chapter 4, we're going to be considering verses 7 to 10. And verse 10 concludes, as I say, with these words, Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up. He will lift you up. It's curious, sometimes maybe even a little disturbing, how the brain works, and one's own brain in particular.

And as I was reading this passage, and as I was struck by these words, He will lift you up, the words that came into my head were the words of a song that you will, I'm sure some of you certainly will be familiar with.

You raise me up. And at the time, I just had some of the words in my head, but I was having difficulty locating them. So, the words of the song, or the song begins with the words, You raise me up, or the chorus does, You raise me up so I can stand on mountains.

[1 : 16] You raise me up to walk on stormy seas. Now, some of you will immediately have identified the song. Some of you won't have. But I couldn't, as it came into my head, because it relates to the language there at the end of verse 10.

But I couldn't identify it. And to begin with, I wondered whether it was a hymn or a worship song of some description. But a quick Google search disabused me of that notion.

And as all you boy band aficionados will know, the most familiar cover version of this particular song was recorded by Westlife some 10 years ago.

It's not really a hymn or a worship song at all, sadly. But it is a beautiful song. And it does have a spiritual feel to it, whatever that means.

The song begins with the words, When I am down, and oh my soul so weary, When troubles come, and my heart burden be, And then it goes on, You raise me up so I can stand on mountains.

[2 : 17] I'm not going to burst into song. Don't be concerned on that front. Apparently, Louis Walsh of X Factor fame suggested to the Westlife boys that they do a cover version of this song.

But they were reluctant to do so. And the reason they were reluctant to do so is that they thought, as they heard the song and read the lyrics, they said, oh no, that sounds like a church song. And so they reckon that wouldn't be very commercial, or it wouldn't go with their image.

I don't know. But they relented, and of course it was a massive hit. It is quite intriguing to hear what the original composer of the song says about it.

And I quote what he has said, or is recorded to have said, about the song. He says this, There's something about the song people are embracing, which becomes emotionally strong.

And then particularly the following words, I believe people think of it as a song they use for their own purposes. You know, how wonderfully postmodern.

[3 : 26] We all feel a need or desire to be lifted up. It is an aspiration that is common to all. It's part of our humanity, the desire, the need, the aspiration to be raised up, to be lifted up.

And, according to the writer of the song, we can all decide on who or what will do the lifting. So for some, it may be God. We can address the words of the song to God.

When I am down and oh my soul so weary, you raise me up. And of course, those who believe in God would say, yes, what a wonderful way of using these words and directing them to God.

Others may choose to direct the words in another direction, to some nondescript higher power, to a friend, to a lover, to a husband, to a wife.

Perhaps even direct them inwards, to some inner strength that will raise us up to stand on mountains and to walk on stormy seas.

[4 : 30] And in the light of that very unhelpful range of possibilities, most of which would fall very far short, what a wonderful thing it is to be able to turn to the Bible and to be confronted with a

trustworthy promise from the very lips of God.

I will lift you up. This is a promise from God through James directed to us. Humble yourselves before the Lord and He will lift you up.

The Lord will lift you up. He is the one who is able and is willing and is ready to lift you up. But this promise, heartwarming though it is, comes at the end of the little section that we want to consider this morning.

And the promise can only be understood, and more importantly, can only be claimed in the light of what comes before. So if you feel or acknowledge a need or desire to be lifted up, listen carefully to what God has to say to you this morning.

Now, in order to do justice to this section, we need to just very briefly remind ourselves of what we discovered last week in the previous verses. Last week we discovered that as believers we enjoy a precious privilege.

[5 : 57] We are married to God. Or in any case, the intimacy of our relationship with God is compared to a marriage. Hence the accusation, you adulterous people.

Those who enjoy this intimate relationship were being unfaithful within that relationship. So it's a precious privilege that is ours as God's people. But we also discovered, and this is what James is concerned about, we discovered that our recurring sin and folly is that of unfaithfulness.

Unfaithfulness to our loving spouse. And that this unfaithfulness results in all manner of pain and broken relationships that James outlines in this passage.

A broken relationship with God, a broken relationship with others, and indeed a broken or fraught relationship even with ourselves. This is the consequence of our unfaithfulness.

And in the light of that, the question that arises that we kind of touched on towards the end of the sermon last Sunday morning is, well, is there hope? Does God have anything to say to His unfaithful people?

[7 : 05] And of course, God does have something to say to us. And James draws our attention to words from God found in the book of Proverbs. There in verse 6 of James chapter 4, the Scripture says, God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

Our unfaithfulness to God drags us down into a fearful pit and into miry clay, but there is the wonderful prospect of being lifted up out of the pit of darkness and despair and despondency. And this hope is captured by this God-authored proverb. God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

But if we are to be lifted up by God, we cannot remain passive. It's God who does the lifting, but it is also God who sets out the conditions or the circumstances in which He will lift us up.

We're not to simply wait and see. We're not to let go and let God. There are actions that we need to take, that God has determined that we need to take, that will result in, that will be accompanied by, if you wish, God lifting us up in the manner that is promised there in the passage.

[8 : 31] And verses 7 to 10 set out for us what we need to do that we might be lifted up by God. And there are two aspects that I want to highlight. First of all, what at heart we have to do and then what that involves.

In many ways, it's the same question, but simply divided in two into identifying the core requirement and then considering what does that look like in real life, day by day, in terms of what we have to do, what it involves.

So, what is it that we have to do? God promises to lift us up, but what do we have to do that we would be the beneficiaries of that promise, that we would experience the reality of that promise? What do we have to do? Verses 7 to 10 serve to develop that the implications of the proverb in the previous verse. Given that God opposes the proud, given that He gives grace to the humble, this is what you need to do.

That is what James is outlining for us. And the core demand directed to us is found at the beginning and at the end of this little section from verses 7 to 10.

[9 : 42] And the two commands that are almost identical, though with different words, almost serve as bookends for what is found in between. Notice that with me as we look at verses 7 and 10.

So, at the beginning of this little section and at the end of this little section, what do we find? We find the key demand, the core demand that God directs to us. Verse 7. What's the very first thing we read there?

Submit yourselves then to God. And it follows, of course, very logically from the proverb that James has just shared with us. God opposes the proud. Well, if He opposes the proud, then what must you do?

Well, you need to submit yourself to God. Those who proudly and selfishly have been unfaithful to Him, what must they do?

If we have proudly and selfishly gone our own way, what must we do? Well, we must humbly submit ourselves to God. It is humble submission and faithful commitment to the Lord that is required of us. [10:47] And a humble submission, not to some tyrant, not to some despot, but to a loving and gracious God. Submit yourselves then to God.

But then in verse 10, you have the same call, the same demand, if you wish, in different language or with different vocabulary. Because there in verse 10, what do we read?

Humble yourselves before the Lord. And that's followed, of course, by the promise that we began by highlighting. Humble yourselves before the Lord. So as I say, it's really the same call in different words.

You've acted unself, unfaithfully. You've acted selfishly and proudly. What are you to do? Humble yourself before the Lord. If you are to receive God's grace that He generously offers to give you, if you are to be lifted up to stand on mountains and walk on stormy seas, then you need to humble yourself before the Lord.

This is the key demand. This is what you must do. Not let go and let God, but submit to God. Not listen to evocative lyrics and hope for a mercurial spiritual high, but humble yourself before the Lord. [12:02] That's what you have to do. What does this involve? What does this look like? What does submission to God look like? What concrete steps are we to take in order that we might humble ourselves before the Lord?

Well, in these few verses, James packs in a lot of stuff that you need to do. But I think we can summarize all that he has to say in one word.

And the word is repentance. Everything that he says in these verses, in between these two key demands, can be summarized in the word repentance.

You need to repent. And let me, from what we have here in these verses, let me draw out four elements of biblical repentance that we find in these verses, wedged between this dual call to submission and humility before the Lord.

To help you remember these four elements, let me give you four words that all begin with the letter C, that I think, without stretching things too much, do justice to the content here that James has penned.

[13:16] The four words that together give us an outline, if you wish, of what biblical repentance looks like. First of all, cry. Secondly, come.

Thirdly, cleanse. And fourthly, combat. And we're going to go through each of these in turn. And as we do go through them, this is what you need to do. If you're serious about submitting to God, if you're serious about humbling yourself before the Lord, if you recognize that that's what you need to do, if God is going to lift you up, then this is what you need to do.

This is what it looks like. And so, listen carefully as we go through each of these steps, if you want to call them steps. Now, what I've done is to take what James has to say in verses 7b to verse 9 and reordered the material somewhat to identify what we could call these four sequential steps in biblical repentance.

To cry, to come, to cleanse, and to combat. And now let's look at each in turn. First of all, you need to cry. Why? Verse 9. What does James say to those who have been proud and unfaithful?

He says this, Grieve, mourn, and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. You need to weep. You need to cry.

[14:37] You need to wail. You need to grieve. We tend to think that the nice thing to do is to encourage people not to cry. You know, somebody's crying and we want to console them.

Oh, don't cry, pet. It will be okay. Don't cry. That's what we usually think is the nice thing to do is to encourage somebody not to cry. Well, James takes a very different tack.

He urges us to cry. He urges us to grieve, to mourn, and to wail. Indeed, he encourages us to stop laughing, to stop rejoicing, and rather that we would mourn and be in gloom.

And it's not a very pretty picture. It doesn't seem a very attractive prospect. You know, people might respond, or you might respond, but what's wrong with laughter? Surely, joy is something that should

mark our lives as believers.

We have so much to be joyful about. Why this very gloomy call on the part of James? What's wrong with laughter and joy? Maybe there's two things we could say.

[15:43] First of all, with regard to laughter and joy, we have to acknowledge that there's a time and a place for everything. There's a time to laugh. There's a time to rejoice.

But there's also a time to cry. And there's a time to grieve. If we think about the context of this passage, where James is accusing the readers of the letter of having been unfaithful to God, of having committed spiritual adultery, how inappropriate to laugh in the face of such sin, how inappropriate to rejoice in the context of acknowledging such unfaithfulness.

There's a time and a place. Yes, there's a time to laugh. Yes, there's a time to rejoice. But there's also a time to grieve. There's also a time to wail. There's also a time to be sad.

So there's a time and a place. But I think also, and this is another reason why James is right to call on his readers to not laugh, but rather to grieve or to wail.

And that is that there is laughter and joy that is inappropriate at any time. You know, what I've just said is that, well, there's laughter and joy that is appropriate at the right time.

[16:55] But there's also laughter and joy that is always inappropriate. That laughter that demonstrates a careless attitude to sin. And so you're called out and you're sitting and you laugh.

You know, it doesn't matter. It's really not that important. And you know, we all do it. And so you laugh it off. We use that expression. Oh, he just laughed it off. And it's wrong to laugh off that which is serious.

It's wrong to laugh off that which is grievous to God. And so James says, no, don't laugh. Your laughter should rather turn to mourning, your joy to gloom.

What James really is urging on his readers and urging to us is what Paul calls godly sorrow.

In his letter to the Corinthians, in the second letter of Paul to the Corinthians, he uses this very helpful expression and explains what it means.

[17:53] In 2 Corinthians 7 and in verse 10, listen to what Paul says. Godly sorrow, which is what James is urging us to experience. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret.

Godly sorrow, it leads to repentance. It's part of, part and parcel of, biblical repentance. Why don't we do what James says?

Why don't we grieve, mourn, and wail? Why do we never, perhaps for some of us, why do we never change our laughter to mourning and our joy to gloom?

Well, if we don't, it's because we don't grasp the seriousness of sin. We don't recognize the pain that it causes. How serious is sin? Well, there are many ways in which we could try and answer that question, but maybe the simplest and most important way of answering that question, how serious is sin, is to direct your eyes to the cross.

It's that serious. It is so serious that the only way that sin could be dealt with was by God the Father giving His Son to die on the cross to pay the penalty of sin.

[19:13] It is that serious. If there had been any other way to deal with sin, the Father would have recurred to that any other way, but there was no other way. Why? Precisely because of how grave and how serious it is.

And it's because it is so serious that when we are brought to acknowledge that we are guilty of sin, that we have been unfaithful to God, a right and appropriate and fitting response as part of genuine repentance is that we know something of what is described here.

Grieve, mourn, and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. What pain does sin cause? Well, just look around you and you see plenty of it.

This is a good measure, one good measure of our spiritual health. If we never grieve, mourn, or wail over our sin, then we can be pretty confident in coming to the conclusion that we are very far from God.

Not that we're not believers. It's not that we aren't Christians, but we're far from God if we never know what it is to grieve and to wail and to mourn over our sin.

[20:23] You want to be lifted up? Well, this is where you must begin. You need to cry. But the second thing that James encourages and urges his readers to do is to come.

Notice there in verse 8, submit yourselves then to God, resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Sorry, that was verse 7. Verse 8, come near to God, and he will come near to you.

Come near to God. What does this mean? Or what does this involve? Why are we to come near to God? Well, when we are brought to see our unfaithfulness and how we have drifted far from God, true repentance will involve both the desire and the decision to come home.

Maybe the most helpful visual image of that is the parable of the prodigal son. We were thinking about it a few weeks ago and highlighted that we really should talk about the prodigal sons. But let's just use its traditional designation of the prodigal son. And what is the picture that is painted there? It is of a man who recognizes his condition, who recognizes his sin, and who determines to return home.

[21 : 31] And this is what James is urging us to do. Come near to God. You've drifted from Him. You've been unfaithful to Him. It's time to come home. Come near to God.

The decision to come home and the first tentative steps in the homeward journey are accompanied by a tender and certain promise, and He will come near to you. And again, the parable of the prodigal son provides us the most beautiful visual illustration of what this looks like.

The prodigal son begins to come home, taking these tentative steps. And what do we read in the parable? The father comes rushing to greet him and to embrace him and to welcome him home. Come near to God and He will come near to you. Don't delay. Don't doubt. Don't waver. Come near to God.

Come home. What does humbling yourself before God involve? What does submitting to God involve? That you might know what it is to be lifted up. Well, it involves crying.

[22 : 34] It involves coming. But then thirdly, it involves cleansing. In verse 8, in the second half of the verse, what do we read? Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

This call to sinners to come near to God, tender though the invitation may sound, is met by an immediate obstacle. How can I, a sinner, come near to a holy God?

What James is asking of me, what James is urging upon me, is something I'm simply not capable of doing. How can I come near to God? We've already established that I've been unfaithful to Him. It's already been established that I'm part of an adulterous people. How could I possibly come near to God in that condition? And yet, this is what we're called to do.

Come near to God. How can I? We think of the words of the psalmist. In Psalm 24, we'll be singing these words at the end of our service. Who may ascend the hill of the Lord?

[23 : 40] Who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands, a pure heart. You know, the very thing that we don't have. Hence the call, wash your hands, purify your hearts.

And yet, the words of the psalmist would seem to suggest, well, we can't approach Him. We can't enter into His holy place because our hands are not clean and our heart is not pure. Our problem as unfaithful adulterers is that we have neither clean hands nor a pure heart.

We have sinned in thought and in deed. Hence the call to wash your hands and purify your hearts. But of course, wonderfully, this cleaning that we are called to participate in is not something that we have to do before we come to God as some kind of spiritual precondition.

Like you wash your hands before you go to the table to have your meal. If you haven't washed your hands, you can't go to the table. No, it's not like that. Yes, you need to wash your hands. Yes, you need to purify your heart.

But it's not something you can do before you come to God. The bottom line is that we can't clean ourselves. We come to God for cleansing, to be forgiven, to be cleansed.

[24 : 56] He does the cleaning. Yes, we need to wash our hands. Yes, we need to purify our hearts. But where that will happen is by approaching God and asking Him to do that for us.

We can't do it for ourselves. So, if we are to respond seriously to this call to submit ourselves to God, to humble ourselves before the Lord, that we might know and experience this wonderful promise of being lifted up, then we need to repent of our sin and that will involve crying, it will involve coming, it will involve being cleansed, but then finally it also involves combat.

Where do I draw that out from? Well, in verse 7, the second half of the verse, what is it that James urges his readers to do? He begins the verse with words that we've already given thought to submit yourselves then to God, but then he says, resist the devil and he will flee from you.

Resist the devil. This is combative language. Jesus, or rather James, sorry, calls on us to resist the devil. And in my mind, this fits most naturally in terms of sequence after the crying, after the coming, and after the cleansing.

You see, the original problem arose because we didn't resist the devil, but now we have repented of our sin, we have come humbly to God, we have received the gift of forgiveness and cleansing. [26 : 27] What now? Well, now we need to take seriously the charge to resist the devil. And as you do resist the devil, so avoid, prevent, falling again into adultery and unfaithfulness.

Let me just note what this call to resist the devil implies and involves, or at least some of what it implies and involves. One thing that probably does need to be stated because so many would quibble with this, but we need to clearly state it, is that this call takes as a given the existence of this personal, spiritual foe spoken of here as the devil.

The devil exists, not the product of some, you know, warped imagination. He is a real personal being who is the enemy of our souls and who would seek to drag us down, to draw us away from God.

That, let it be very clear. And the call to resist him takes that as a given. But I think another thing we can draw from this call to resist the devil is that the opposition of the devil is principally directed to those who are seeking to submit to God.

Think of it this way. You know, if we, of our own will and as a result of our own folly, are living careless, sinful lives, drifting from God as Christians, then I don't really think the devil needs to occupy much time with us.

[28 : 03] He can occupy his energies and his resources elsewhere. But if we take seriously what James is urging us to do, to humble ourselves before God, to submit to the Lord, that is when the devil will take note and begin to direct his attention to us.

And so it is then in particular that we need to with great care resist him, resist the devil. But what does that look like?

What does it mean to resist the devil? Well, resistance to the devil is principally to his advances as the tempter. That's how the devil is described. He is the tempter.

He is the one who would tempt us to sin. And resistance to him is resistance to his lies. The lies that he would peddle that would make us imagine that it's okay to sin, that it's not that serious, that we don't need to be that fanatical.

Those are the lies that he peddles. And we need to resist those lies. You remember the occasion when the devil sought to, not sought to, but tempted Jesus. What was the problem?

[29 : 10] What were the resources that he used? What were his weapons? They were lies. Lies. And Jesus had to resist the lies. That's how he resisted the devil and we must do.

Likewise, we resist his advances as he would tempt us and as he would seek to deceive us with his lies. But this resistance is also accompanied, as other of the commands that we find in this little section, it's accompanied by a striking promise.

He will flee from you. The devil is powerful, but he's not that powerful. When you resist the devil, keeping a tight grip on the hand of God, what does the devil see?

Imagine that battle scene. And obviously, it's not something you can imagine in terms of a physical battlefield. But just imagine that spiritual battlefield where the devil is seeking to tempt you, seeking to bring you down.

And you're resisting him, but you're resisting him, holding a tight grip on the Lord, seeking his help and his strength. What does the devil see when he approaches you and would tempt you?

[30 : 20] Well, he sees the one whose hand you're holding on to. That's why he flees. You see, if you were all by yourself, he wouldn't flee because he's more than strong enough to knock you down.

But when he sees who you're accompanied by, who you're holding on to, then he flees. Imagine a wee boy in primary one and he's being bullied by the school bully.

And of course, the school bully, he's in primary five and he's big and he's bad. He's bullying this poor wee boy. And people say to him, you've got to resist the bully.

You know, what prospect is the wee boy of resisting the boy in P5? He says, well, yeah, I wish I could. But just imagine the scene when he comes to school one day and he's holding the hand of his big brother.

His big brother is 18 and he's an amateur boxer. And he comes and there's the boy in P5. And he sees this.

[31 : 23] What does the boy in P5 do? He turns around and he runs away. He flees. Why? Because the resistance has weight to it.

And so when we are called to resist the devil, we have to do it holding tightly onto God's hand. When that is our condition, then be assured that the devil will flee from us. So we've discovered what we need to do. We need to submit to or humble ourselves before God. We've discovered what that involves. Essentially, it involves repentance. We need to cry. We need to come to God. We need to be cleansed by God. And having experienced all of that, we then need to stand firm. We need to combat the devil. We need to resist his advances and his temptations. And when at God's instigation and with the help of God's Spirit, we do these things, what does God do for us?

[32 : 22] Well, that takes us back to where we began. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up. He'll lift you up so you can stand on mountains. He'll lift you up to walk on stormy seas. He'll lift you up to take your place by his loving side and at his loving service.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We acknowledge that we are sinners. We acknowledge that we are unfaithful to you in all manner of ways. So often, our unfaithfulness is at face of all you are on the surface, oh so respectable. So often, we are able to avoid what might be thought of as grosser sins, but we are unfaithful nonetheless. We acknowledge that you are the one who sees our heart. And while others may look on us and think of us as a picture of piety, you see what is within.

[33 : 24] And in the light of that, we can do no other than confess that we are unfaithful to you. But we thank you that in that reality or in the face of that reality, we do not have a God who would discard us, who would give up on us, who would move on to more promising prospects, but rather you are the God who draws us back to yourself.

You are the God who does oppose the proud, but who gives grace to the humble. There is more grace available to us, and we thank you for that. We pray that you would help us. We pray that by the working of your Spirit in us, we would know what it is to live lives that are marked by genuine, heartfelt repentance. and we ask that you would help us so to repent and help us to, as we do, know and experience and delight in what it is to be lifted up by you. And all of these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.