

THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST

SPREADING THE SOUL-SAVING MESSAGE OF JESUS

JAMES LESSON 4 (Chapter 4)

Introduction by narrator accompanied by a cappella singing:

THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST. Spreading the soul-saving message of Jesus. And now, Kevin Pendergrass.

Welcome to the Gospel of Christ. This is the last lesson in our series on the Book of James. James is a very practical book. There are many points that we can pull out of this book in order to apply them to our lives to help us be better people and to help us be better Christians. In this last lesson I want to ask a very important question. In fact, this question is one that many people do not like to have asked to them. And, it is one that we do not like to ask to other people. It is a topic that, many times, we like to stay away from. The question is this: What would happen if I died tonight? If you knew that tonight was the last night of your life, what kind of example would you leave behind? What kind of thoughts would you have as you looked back on your life? If you could look back and change things because you knew that tonight was your last night, would you have done things differently? Would you make things right that you knew that you needed to make right? Death is a topic that many people do not like to think about. Death is a topic that many people do not even want to discuss. I've heard people say that when they watched the news and the subject came up about people who had died, they would change the channel. They did not even want to think about death. As humans, so many times we want to concentrate on just "the here and now." We want to talk about how great life is and how much fun it is. And, we want to have the mentality of "eat, drink, and be merry" in order to live our lives while we have them. But death is something that every single one of us is going to have to face one day. We will not be able to live on Earth forever. So today, let's think about the question, "What would happen if I died tonight?"

Let's begin by looking at James 4:13-17 in order to see just how precious life really is.

"Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit'; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.' But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do it, to him it is sin."

What does James have to say here about our lives? He says that we often think about what we are going to do tomorrow, and we want to make plans. If you look at sports teams, what happens when a team wins a certain tournament, or when the team wins the biggest game of the year, and the team is being interviewed. The interviewer might ask, "What did you think about this game? How are you feeling right now?" The response might be, "We are looking forward to next year. We can't wait to come back and do this again." They are not even enjoying the here and now because they are too concerned about what might happen tomorrow or next year. The Bible says that such an attitude is foolish or arrogant. What is our life? It is a vapor. For most of us, we will not have any forewarning about when we are going to die. In asking the question, "What would happen if I died tonight?" I want us to ask a series of questions dealing with this issue.

The first question is this: “If I died tonight, what kind of example would I leave behind?” If you knew that tonight was your last night, what kind of example would you leave behind for your friends, family, neighbors, and community? There are really only two options. You could say, “If I died tonight, I would leave behind a good example.” In Genesis 4 we read of the story of Cain and Abel. I want us to look at the example that Abel left behind for us—a good example. In Genesis 4:1-2 the Bible says,

“Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, and said, ‘I have acquired a man from the Lord.’ Then she bore again, this time his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground.”

Here we have the two brothers—Cain and Abel. Listen to what is about to happen.

“In the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the Lord. Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the Lord respected Abel and his offering” (vss. 3-4).

It wasn’t that Cain did not bring an offering; it was that Abel’s offering was respected by God. What did God think about Cain’s offering? What kind of offering did Cain have? Verses 5-7 tell us.

“But God did not respect Cain and his offering. And Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. So the Lord said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it.’”

Notice the way that the two brothers were living their lives. Cain did not have a good sacrifice. He did not act by faith (Rom. 10:17). The Lord gave him another opportunity. Abel had made a good sacrifice that was acceptable to God. God respected it. Cain had an opportunity to offer another sacrifice so he could be like Abel and leave behind a good example. Instead, look at what Cain did.

“Now Cain talked with Abel his brother; and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, ‘Where is Abel your brother?’ He said, ‘I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?’ And He said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground” (vss. 8-10).

Cain had an opportunity to leave behind a good example, but instead ended up killing his brother. What kind of example did Abel leave behind? He left behind a wonderful example for us. In Hebrews 11:4 the writer looked back on this story and said, “By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and through it, he being dead still speaks.” Abel’s example still speaks to us today. If tonight was the last night of your life, could you look back on your life and say, “I left behind a good example?” Perhaps people did not always agree with you, but they at least knew where you stood, that you stood for the truth, and that you did the right thing by obeying God. Could people look back and say, “This is a man who always did the right thing and who left behind a good example”? We would hope that we could all say that.

But if we cannot say that we would leave behind a good example, the only other option is that we would leave behind a bad example. Herod was a man who left behind a very bad example, as we see in Acts 12:21-24.

“So on a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat on his throne and gave an oration to them. And the people kept shouting, ‘The voice of a god and not of a man!’ Then immediately an angel of the Lord struck him, because he did not give glory to God. And he was eaten by worms and died. But the word of God grew and multiplied.”

Would your example be like that of Herod? Would it be a bad example, so that when people looked back, they saw only evil, sin, and something bad? Is that what people would see of you if you were to die tonight?

Another example is Judas. He was a man who had walked with Jesus as one of His disciples. Yet he ended up committing suicide by hanging himself. Acts 1:25 says that he “fell by transgression and went to his own place.” Judas will be lost eternally in Hell. Why? Because he was not willing to do the right thing. He could have changed his life, just like we can change our lives. But once we die, it’s too late. The example that we leave behind will be either for the better or for the worse.

Let us look at some godly men found in the Bible. Look at Paul, and the great example that he left behind. Look at Timothy and Peter, and see their great examples. Or, look at the example that our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, left for us to follow. If we were to die tonight, what kind of example would we leave behind?

The second question I want to ask is this: “If I died tonight, what kind of regrets would I have?” If tonight was my last night on Earth, what kind of regrets would I have? Would I have any regrets at all? Sometimes older people (in their 80s or 90s) with whom I have talked have said, “There were times when I made mistakes, but I always grew from those mistakes. There are things I would have done differently, but I really don’t have any major regrets in my life because I lived it for the Lord.” Could we say that we do not have any major regrets? There might be some things that we could have changed or done differently. But overall, do we have any major regrets? Ephesians 5:23-26 speaks about the awesome responsibility that is laid upon the husband wife when it comes to the marital relationship. Would we have regrets about how we treated our spouse? Would we say, “I wish I had spent more time with that person,” or “I wish I had treated them with more love,” or “I wish I had not been so selfish, and had shown her that I cared about her so that she knew she was very important to me”? Or, could we look back and say, “I did everything that I could for my spouse. I loved her deeply, and I have no regrets”? The Bible says that that relationship is so vital and so important. What kind of regrets would we have in regard to our spouses if we were to die tonight?

In Ephesians 6:1-5 the Bible talks about how we are to raise up our children. Would we have regrets that we did not spend more time with our children? I’ve never met a man or woman who, once the children had left the house, said, “I spent too much time with my children,” or “I wish I had worked more and had put in more overtime.” I’ve never heard such comments before. But I have heard people say, “I wish I had not worked as much,” or “I wish I had spent more time with my children,” or “I wish I had shown them a little more how much I loved them,” or “I wish I had been there more to play with them and to train them.” What about the ways that children look at their parents? Would the children wish that they had done things differently? Do children still love and respect their parents? Do children still call their parents, and take care of them to the best of their ability? Would children have any regrets regarding such things?

Now I want to talk about a man whom I know had regrets when it came to his priorities. In Luke 12:13ff. we find a parable about the man whom we know as “the rich fool.”

“Then one from the crowd said to Him, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.’ But He said to him, ‘Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?’ And He said to them, ‘Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses’” (vss. 13-15).

We need to understand that it is not how many material things we obtain in this life. A lot of people regret that because they cannot take those things with them. Jesus said that it is not about the material things, and then went on to say,

“The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. And he thought within himself, saying, ‘What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?’ So he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods’” (vss. 16-19).

This man had his priorities in the wrong place. He had been working, and had so many crops that he didn’t know what to do with all of them. The barns he had at that time could not even hold the crops. So he said that he would pull down the old barns and build bigger barns so that he could continue to put his plentiful crops in them. What was his priority? It was about making sure that he was happy. It was about selfishness and money. His attitude was, “What can I have right now? What can I do?” Notice all the times that he used the word “I.” It was “me, me, me” and “I, I, I.” It was all about what he wanted. But notice what the man said in verse 19: “I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.’” His attitude was, “I’ve got all these things stored up for years to come. So, I can eat, drink, and be merry.” This is the mentality of which I was speaking a minute ago—“Let’s just live it up while we have it. I might change later, but right now I am going to eat, drink, and be merry. I’m set for life. I’ve got a wonderful life in front of me.” But notice what Jesus went on to say in this parable.

“But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?’ So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God” (vss. 20-21).

This is a sad, sad story that represents the mentality of so many today. They want to get what they want right now. It’s all about “them” and their material things. Their attitude is, “If I don’t have everything I want, then I’m going to go out and get it. And once I have it, I’m going to keep wanting more, more, and more.” Jesus said, “Fool! Your soul is required of you. Whose will those things be that you have provided?” I’ve heard the saying that you never see luggage being carried in a hearse—because you cannot take material things with you when you die.

What kinds of regrets would you have? Maybe you would have regrets that you never went to church. Hebrews 10:25 condemns those who forsake the assembling of the saints. Perhaps you would have regrets because it was always “tomorrow” when you planned to go to church. It was always “next week” when you were going to go to church. It was always “next month” or next year.” I cannot tell you how many times I’ve pleaded with people to come back to church or to come for the first time, and they said, “I’m planning on doing that, but right now I have a few things that I need to get in order. Right now I have a few things I need to take care of. I’m working overtime, but after I’m through with that, then I’ll come to church.” It’s always “later, later, later.” But if you were to die tonight, that time would never have come for you because you were putting it off. That would be a regret if you had never gone to church. Or, maybe you had gone, but you had fallen away. You intended to go back, but always had the mindset of “I will go back later.” How about right now? How about changing those things today?

Or, what about the regret that you never obeyed the Gospel? Maybe you are not a Christian. You have yet to obey the Gospel, but “you are going to...” You say, “I am going to obey the Gospel. There are just a few things that I need to get in order in my life. I want to raise my children. My child graduates, and I want him to go ahead and graduate, and then I’ll obey the Gospel. Right now I have ‘this’ in my life or ‘that’ in my life, and I want to get those things straightened out before I obey the Gospel.” In 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9 we find a very scary passage for those who are not faithful to God. It says that there are two groups of people who will spend eternity in Hell. The first group is those who do not know God.

This could be those who once were Christians, yet who no longer know God, love Him, or keep His commandments. The second group is those who never obeyed the Gospel. How do you obey the Gospel? Romans 6:3-4 says that we must be baptized in water for the forgiveness of our sins. Galatians 3:27 says that we obey the Gospel when we are baptized because it is then that we come in contact with the blood of Jesus. Have you done that? Maybe you know that you need to do that. Why are you putting it off? If you died tonight, I can assure you that you would regret having not obeyed the Gospel.

Do not have the mentality of which we read in Acts 24:25 where Paul “reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, and Felix was afraid and answered, ‘Go away for now; when I have a convenient time I will call for you.’” Don’t have that mentality—“When I have a convenient time, I’ll talk to you. Right now I’m busy, but I do want to study. When I have a more convenient time, then you can come talk with me about these things.” Please, do not have that mentality. Do something right now—today—if you have yet to obey the Gospel.

Maybe you have obeyed the Gospel and are a Christian. If you did die tonight, you would have the regret that you had not told more people what they need to do to go to Heaven. In Matthew 28:19-20 and Mark 16:15-16 we read that it is our responsibility to spread the news, and to give people the opportunity to obey the truth. It is up to us to tell people about Jesus, and to tell people about what they need to do to go to Heaven. If we died tonight, maybe we would have a regret because we were going to tell our grandparents. We were going to tell our spouses. We were going to tell that person whom we used to meet walking down the road or at the grocery store. We were going to say something, but because we died, we will never have that opportunity. Who will tell those people now? Maybe you would have been the only person with whom that person came in contact who could have given the person an opportunity to obey the Gospel. Would you regret having missed that opportunity? It is like the song that says, “You never mentioned Him to me.” Would you have the regret that you did not tell more people about the Gospel?

There are many regrets that we could examine in more detail. But it is important for us to look at these because right now we are still living—which means that there is something we can do about potential regrets. We can change, if right now we have any such regrets.

The last question that I want us to ask is the most important question: “If I died tonight, where would I spend eternity?” Would I be in Heaven? Heaven is such a wonderful place, as we see when we go to the Bible and read about Heaven. Revelation 21:1-4 says,

“Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.’”

When you read this, don’t you want to go there? Isn’t this a place where you would like to be for all eternity? There will be no more death. There will be no more tears that you have to shed because those things will have passed away. In verses 22-25 John goes on to say,

“But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light. And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into it. Its gates shall not be shut at all by day (there shall be no night there).”

The beauty and wonder of Heaven are described here. In Revelation 22:1-3 John wrote,

“And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him.”

What will we be doing for eternity? We will be serving God. How wonderful and magnificent it is to know that we will get to be with God for eternity. Can we say that right now? If we were to die tonight, where would we spend eternity? I hope we can all say that we would know for a fact that we would spend eternity in Heaven.

If it is not Heaven, where would it be? Some would like for there to be a sort of “gray area” with a Heaven, a Hell, and a middle place of some kind. The truth is that the Bible does not say that. The Bible says that we will spend eternity in one of two places. If it is not Heaven, the only other option is Hell. Hell is a real place. Hell will last just as long as Heaven—for all eternity. It is not a place that people have invented. It is not a place of which Christ spoke just to scare people. It is a place that is real. We need to fear it and not want to go there, but love God enough so that we want to go to Heaven. Look at how Christ spoke of Hell in Mark 9:42-48.

“But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched—where ‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’ And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame, rather than having two feet, to be cast into hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched—where ‘Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’ And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire—where ‘Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’”

Do you believe that the Lord was trying to get across a point? Of course He was. The repetition that we see in those verses is because the Lord wanted us to know that Hell is a real place, and that it is a scary place where He does not want us to go. The sad reality, however, is that the majority of the world will spend eternity in Hell. We do not want that to happen—to ourselves or to you. If you died tonight, could you confidently say that you would have Heaven as your eternal home? In Luke 16:19-32 we read of the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Both of them died. The rich man went to Torment, while Lazarus went to Paradise. Both were awaiting eternal judgment. We know where those two men will spend eternity—one in Heaven and one in Hell. It was so bad that the rich man begged for Abraham to be able to dip his finger into some water and touch it to his tongue. That is how bad it was. And this was not even Hell, but was Torment—the waiting place of the evil. Hell is a scary place. Hell is a real place. Hell is a place where the majority of the world will be for eternity, as Jesus said in Matthew 7:13-14.

Make sure that if you were to die tonight, Hell is not where you would spend eternity. Hebrews 9:27 says that there will come a day when we will all face God’s judgment. You may not die tonight, next week, or for fifty or sixty more years. But the truth is that we all will have to face God’s judgment one day. Can you be like the people to whom John was writing in 1 John 5:13, of whom he said, “These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life”? You can absolutely know for a fact. It’s not, “If I died tonight, I sure hope that I would go to Heaven” or “I think I would go to Heaven.” Rather, it’s an attitude that says, “Yes, I know I would go to Heaven—not because I feel like it, but because the Bible tells me so.” There is only one way to

go to Heaven—by being a faithful child of God. The only way to become a Christian is by hearing the Word of God (Rom. 10:17), believing in Christ as the Son of God (Jn. 3:16), repenting of yours sins (Acts 17:30), confessing that Jesus is Lord (Rom. 10:10), and being baptized in water for the forgiveness of yours sins (Mk. 16:15-16). Once the Lord adds you to His church—the church of Christ (the one church that He built; Acts 2:47)—you must continue to walk in the light as He is in the light (1 Jn. 1:7-9). If you died tonight, would you be sure that you would go to Heaven? If you have yet to obey the truth, we pray today that you will obey the Gospel of Christ.

Narrator accompanied by a cappella singing:

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STUDY QUESTIONS FOR JAMES LESSON 4 (CHAPTER 4)

1. What was the “important question” with which Kevin Pendergrass opened this lesson on the Book of James (and that served as the focal point of his remaining comments)?
2. In James 4:14, to what did James compare a human life?
3. In James 4:15, what did James urge us to say when we are making plans to do something?
4. What important point is made in James 4:17?
5. In Genesis 4:1-15 two men are mentioned. Which one of those two men left behind a bad example—and why?
6. According to Hebrews 11:4, one of the two men mentioned in Genesis 4:1-15 “being dead, still speaks.” Who was that man, and why does he “still speak” to us today?
7. Acts 12:21-24 tells of a man during New Testament times who had set a bad example. What was his name, and why did he leave us with a bad example that we should not follow?
8. Acts 1:25 mentions a man in New Testament times who left a bad example. What was his name, and what did he do that set a bad example?
9. In Luke 12:16-21 Jesus told His disciples a parable. Who was the subject of that parable, and what had the person in the parable done that had set such a bad example?
10. What important message for us today is found in Luke 12:21?
11. Who (or what) does Hebrews 10:25 condemn?
12. In 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9 Paul mentioned two groups of people who will spend eternity in Hell. Explain who composes each of those two groups.
13. From Acts 24:25 we learn that Paul was speaking to a certain person about three important topics. What was the person’s name, and what were the topics?
14. From Acts 26 we learn that Paul was speaking to a certain person about the Gospel. What was the person’s name?
15. According to Acts 26:28, what was the person’s reaction to Paul’s message?
16. What important topic was Jesus Christ discussing in Mark 9:42-48?
17. In Luke 16:19-32 Christ discussed the eternal destiny of two individuals. Who were they, and what were their destinies?
18. In Matthew 7:13-14, what reminder did Jesus offer us?