

LAMENT IN JAMES AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE CHURCH

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Abstract: *Christians have long heard the voice in James of the suffering Christian who endures joyfully and faithfully until Christ's triumphant return, a voice that has justifiably encouraged multitudes of downtrodden believers to hang on for another day. This voice most loudly resounds in James 1:2: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds." There is, however, another voice of the sufferer in James that has gone unheard—the voice of the lamenter. The lamenter does not suffer in silence but pleads passionately with God to change his or her suffering. This article listens to both voices in James and teases out some implications for today's church.*

Key Words: *lament, lamenter, James, James 1:2, patient endurance, patience, suffering, prayer, trials*

A stalwart of comfort and challenge during difficult times, Jas 1:2 is a staple among ministers of all stripes: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds” (NIV). Christians through the centuries have used Jas 1:2 to encourage their fellow believers to prayerfully and patiently endure suffering. And its influence from the preacher’s pulpit to the musician’s stage can hardly be overstated. Yet when it comes to patiently enduring suffering, there is more to James’s theology. He also teaches an equally valid and complementary response to suffering—a response yet to be discussed by Jamesian scholars, namely lament. In light of this oversight, the purpose of this article is to give a voice to the lament in James and to explore the significance of this voice for today’s church. To lay the groundwork for this exploration, I first define “lament” and situate this article against the backdrop of recent lament research.

I. LAMENT: DEFINITION AND RECENT RESEARCH

In the current parlance of biblical research, lament is an identifiable genre that, at its core, is prayer—a distraught prayer to God for him to change something that the praying person experiences as distressing, saddening, or oppressive. Examples of experiences that frequently lead to biblical lament include, among other things, sickness, injustice, and enemy oppression. Rebekah Eklund defines lament well: “[I]t is a persistent cry for salvation to the God who promises to save, in a situation of

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suffering or sin, in the confident hope that this God hears and responds to cries, and acts *now* and *in the future* to make whole.”¹

When the psalmist prays, “O God, why have you rejected us forever?” he is lamenting (Ps 74:1, NIV); when Jesus, quoting Ps 22:1, asks his heavenly Father, “Why have you forsaken me?” he is lamenting (Mark 15:34, NIV); and when the martyrs beneath the altar in Rev 6:10 plead with the Lord, “How long, Sovereign Lord ... until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” they are lamenting. These are laments because they are distressful prayers that solicit God for change. Conversely, when Jesus weeps over Jerusalem (Luke 13:34–35), he is not, at least overtly or in the biblical sense of the term, lamenting about Jerusalem; rather, he is grieving for Jerusalem. He is not lamenting because he is not praying.² All biblical lament contains grief, but not all grief is lament. *Biblical lament is prayer*. This is an important distinction to make because, as I have noted elsewhere, NT scholars tend to misidentify and misunderstand biblical lament by conflating it with grief.³

Notable OT scholars such as Claus Westermann and others carved out this definition of biblical lament over the course of several decades, building on the pioneering work of Hermann Gunkel who first (re)identified the OT lament in the 1930s.⁴ There is no need to retrace this history here because others and I have already done so elsewhere.⁵ Suffice it to say that OT scholars have established that the biblical lament, on the backdrop of similar ANE trajectories, emerges in the Decalogue (Exod 2:23), reaches its literary zenith in the Psalms (complete with a relatively predictable and complex, though still flexible, structure), and gradually, by the end of the OT era, lost its generic rigidity. Its core element of a distressful prayer to change a given plight, however, remained intact.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, NT scholars began to explore how the lament influences the NT, an exploration that has blossomed significantly in the last fifteen years. Scholars have explored how the lament influences the Gospels, Romans, Revelation, and NT theology more broadly. There is no need to re-

¹ Rebekah Eklund, *Jesus Wept: The Significance of Jesus' Laments in the New Testament* (LNTS 515; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark), 16–17 (italics original).

² D. Keith Campbell, “New Testament Scholars’ use of Old Testament Lament Terminology and Its Theological and Interdisciplinary Implications,” *BBR* 21 (2011): 213–26. Jesus, however, may be evoking what Eklund calls the “ethos of lament” (*Jesus Wept*, 20), which I discuss below.

³ Campbell, “New Testament Scholars’ use of Old Testament Lament Terminology and its Theological and Interdisciplinary Implications,” 213–26. This misidentification is understandable since in modern parlance the two terms are synonymous.

⁴ Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 168. Hermann Gunkel and Joachim Begrich, *Einleitung in die Psalmen: Die Gattungen der religiösen Lyrik Israels* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1933).

⁵ See D. Keith Campbell, *Of Heroes and Villains: The Influence of the Psalmic Lament on Synoptic Characterization* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 2–4; and Walter C. Bouzard, *We Have Heard with our Ears, O God: Sources of the Communal Laments in the Psalms* (SBLDS 159; Atlanta: Scholars, 1997), 103 n. 3.

trace this history here because I did so at length rather recently.⁶ It is sufficient here simply to summarize two of the most recent contributions to NT lament studies.

First, I summarize Eklund's *Jesus Wept*, because she is the first researcher to articulate an entire summary/theology of NT lament and because I situate my conclusion below within her insightful arguments. Eklund demonstrates that Jesus prayed, embodied, and represents God's answer to the OT lament. This answer, however, does not silence the believer's lament but refracts it. It refracts it by embedding it within the so-called "already, not yet" eschatology of the NT. In Eklund's own words,

Christian laments rejoice in God's saving actions in the now and hope urgently for God's saving actions in the future. ... Those who lament stand on the boundary between the old age and the new and hope for things unseen. In this respect, the longing of lament is a training in non-passive patience, in a form of waiting that strains eagerly toward the future.⁷

Eklund's concept of lament as "non-passive patience" emerges from the NT's teaching about patient endurance, a theme pertinent to James. It is the eschatological nature of lament that "reveals the close connection between lament and patient endurance."⁸ "Without patient endurance," Eklund continues, "lament risks losing its final stanza of praise and hope, and thus risks lapsing into despair. Without lament, patient endurance risks becoming passive or fails to speak truthfully about the nature of suffering in the present age."⁹ I return below to how James appropriates this concept of non-passive patience.

Second, I summarize a fourfold taxonomy for delineating and detecting OT lament influences on the NT—a taxonomy that I compiled and nuanced in a previous article from the works of Eklund and Scott Ellington.¹⁰ I mention this taxonomy because my discussion below of the lament in James depends heavily on it and because intertextual allusions and echoes are not always self-evident. NT laments fall into four categories:

(1) lament references: references made to laments being offered without the reader being told their content (e.g. Paul's unstated prayer for the removal of his thorn; 2 Cor 12:8–9);

(2) lament allusions: quotes or echoes of specific OT laments (e.g. the passerby "shaking their heads" in Matt 27:39 at Jesus's crucifixion like the mockers in Ps 22:7);

⁶ D. Keith Campbell, "New Testament Lament in Current Research and Its Implications for American Evangelicals," *JETS* 57 (2014): 757–72.

⁷ Eklund, *Jesus Wept*, 171–72.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁰ Campbell, "New Testament Lament in Current Research," 767–68; Eklund, *Jesus Wept*, 17–19; Scott A. Ellington, *Risking Truth: Reshaping the World through Prayers of Lament* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2008), 164–67.

(3) texts that evoke the ethos and function of the lament (e.g. Jesus weeping at Lazarus's tomb; John 11:35);¹¹

(4) lament fragments: isolated petitions to God or to Jesus that are self-contained and stand alone (e.g. the martyrs' cry to God in Rev 6:10: "How long, O Lord ...?" [NASB]; and the Canaanite woman who cries to Jesus in Matt 15:22: "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David" [NASB]). Lament fragments are those petitions that contain Westermann's so-called core elements of the lament: the one who laments, God/Jesus, and the others (including inanimate issues such as sickness, enemies, etc.).¹²

I now turn attention to the letter of James, reading it through the lens of the aforementioned definition of the biblical lament (as a distressful prayer to God for him to change a given plight) while delineating James's laments via this fourfold taxonomy. In the conclusion, I will return to Eklund in order to situate the Jamesian lament more specifically within the trajectory of her broader NT lament theology. Also in the conclusion, I will summarize the characteristics of the Jamesian lament and discuss its significance for the church. To do this adequately, I first explore (1) James's more general teachings about prayer and patient endurance; (2) the lament in James; and (3) patient endurance and lament within James's broader theology.

II. JAMES, PRAYER, AND PATIENT ENDURANCE

When it comes to prayer, James is best known for how he encourages his readers in 1:2–18 to patiently and prayerfully endure life's challenges. Just as the ink dries from a brief greeting (1:1), James pens one of modern Christianity's most memorable verses. He encourages his beleaguered, Jewish readers, who were "scattered among the nations" (1:1b), to "consider it pure joy ... whenever [they] face trials of many kinds" (Jas 1:2, NIV), fronting "all joy" in the Greek for emphasis.¹³

Contrary to natural inclinations, believers should find joy in suffering because life's trials, as part of God's "good gifts" (1:17), serve a spiritually productive purpose and produce certain spiritual results in their lives. The purpose of life's trials is to test faith (1:3). The spiritual results are twofold. First, they "develop perseverance" (1:3), a phrase which Douglas Moo vividly describes as a "picture ... of a person successfully carrying a heavy load for a long time."¹⁴ The *telos* of this perseverance is spiritual "maturation," "completion," and the "lacking of nothing" (1:4).

¹¹ This category is the most challenging one to identify in the NT because it is one step removed from a lament proper. Take Jesus's weeping at Lazarus's tomb as an example. John does not overtly state that Jesus's weeping is a lament to God. Jesus may simply be sad because his friend is dead.

¹² Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 169. As a scholar focusing solely on the OT lament, Westermann does not include Jesus in his core elements of the lament. I include Jesus primarily because of Gail O'Day's convincing argument that Gospel characters can lament to Jesus ("Surprised by Faith: Jesus and the Canaanite Woman," *Listening* 24 [1989]: 290–301).

¹³ John Painter and David A. deSilva, *James and Jude* (Paideia; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 61.

¹⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 55.

For James, then, a trial serves as an anvil upon which spiritual lives are hammered into maturity. They are, to put it differently, part of God's sanctifying process that hones the skills needed to stay committed to the faith. Second, life's trials result in blessings (1:12), perhaps an echoing reference to Jesus's Beatitudes (Matt 5:10–11). Part of these blessings includes an eschatological reward for those who endure suffering until life's end; those who successfully "[withstand] the test" will receive God's promised "crown of life" (1:12)—a first century reference to the laurel wreath given to winners in athletic games (cf. 1 Cor 9:25) and to victorious emperors.¹⁵

To patiently endure trials and to understand them within a context of spiritual maturation—both of which James concretely illustrates with examples of relationships between the rich and poor (1:9–11)—requires wisdom from God (1:5a–b).¹⁶ Obtaining the kind of wisdom needed to endure suffering patiently simply requires asking God for it in prayer (1:5d). In fact, God will give wisdom "generously" to all who ask him for it (1:5c) if they ask in faith without doubting (1:6–8).

In Jas 1:2–18, then, believers should joyfully celebrate life's trials because of the resulting spiritual benefits. James does not encourage believers in 1:2–18 to pray for the removal of their trials. That is, he does not tell them to lament.

James continues his emphasis on patient endurance in 5:1–11, which echoes, and perhaps forms an inclusio with, 1:2–18.¹⁷ Christians who suffer under rich oppressors (5:1–6) should "be patient" (5:7a) like farmers who wait for the autumn and spring rains (5:7c) so that their land will "yield its valuable crop." That is, a payoff at the harvest will come to the farmer who waits patiently. In a similar way, a payoff at the "Lord's return" will come for believers who patiently endure suffering (5:7b, 8b). While enduring patiently (commanded a second time in 5:8a), James instructs his readers to "stand firm" (literally: "strengthen your hearts" *στηρίξατε τὰς καρδίας ὑμῶν*) 5:8a) because—in a second reference to the Lord's return—relief is on the way: "the Lord's coming is near" (5:8c). Also, while enduring patiently, they are to avoid grumbling, or they, too, like their rich oppressors, will face judgment (5:9).

To further encourage his distressed readers to endure patiently, James mentions "the prophets" as examples "of patience in the face of suffering" (5:10–11). The prophets, who "spoke in the name of the Lord," "persevered" in their suffering and were "blessed" because of it. James also references Job, the OT's proverbial sufferer, as an example of patient endurance. James speaks about Job to remind his readers that the Lord eventually reversed Job's misfortunes, a reversal that happens because "the Lord is full of compassion and mercy" (5:11). Thus, patience amidst suffering is worth it for faithful Christians because a reversal of fortunes looms on the horizon.

¹⁵ Ibid., 70.

¹⁶ On the literary relation between 1:5–8 and 1:2–4, see *ibid.*, 55.

¹⁷ Ibid.

In Jas 5:1–11, then, those who endure patiently at the hands of rich oppressors will, in the same way as those in 1:2–18, be liberated from their suffering at the Lord’s return. Blessings will come to those who stand firm—to those who, with the Lord’s strength and wisdom, tough it out. Christians throughout the ages, and especially those in the modern West, have justifiably rallied around James’s theology of suffering patiently. However, there is another side to James’s teaching on prayer and patient endurance, a side that has until now gone unrecognized. James also encourages his readers to lament.

III. JAMES AND LAMENT

Patient endurance in James is not tantamount to silence before God, a fact that only a few commentators note, and none, at least to my knowledge, explore within the context of James’s broader theology. Alongside of his teaching on patient endurance, James also, paradoxically, expects and encourages his readers to pray for God to remove their plight. That is, he expects and encourages them to lament. These laments occur twice in chapter 5.

1. *James 5:4*. The first lament appears in 5:4b: “The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.” In alignment with the definition of lament discussed above, this is a distressful (“cries”) prayer (directed to “the Lord”) to change a given plight (oppression from the rich [5:1]). Moreover, as Luke Timothy Johnson notes, Jas 5:4b likely echoes lament Ps 17:7 (LXX):¹⁸

The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears [εις τὰ ὄτα κυρίου ... εἰσεληλύθασιν] of the Lord of hosts. (Jas 5:4, ESV)

In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears [εἰσελεύσεται εἰς τὰ ὄτα αὐτοῦ]. (Ps 18:6, ESV; LXX Ps 17:7)

More specifically, within the taxonomy of NT laments discussed above (lament references; lament allusions; lament fragments; texts that evoke the ethos and function of the lament; and lament fragments), Jas 5:4 is a lament reference.

As a lament reference, James does not explicitly tell us the content of the “harvester’s” prayers. He simply records *that* they lament. While the harvesters could be “crying” (κράζει) to God solely for patience to endure their oppression instead of asking God in lamentation to remove their suffering, this is unlikely for four reasons. First, OT writers—and especially the authors of OT wisdom literature—almost exclusively use κράζω (in dozens of instances) in the context of prayer to ask God for help, to ask God to change something, or (more rarely) to repent of sins (cf. Joel 1:14). In essence, κράζω is the OT word of choice for suffering

¹⁸ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Letter of James: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 37A; New York: Doubleday, 1995), 302–3. Johnson also notes a similarity between Jas 5:4b and the lament of Israel in Exod 3:7, though the verbal and the syntactical correspondences are weak: “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry [τῆς κραυγῆς αὐτῶν ἀχόχοα] because of their taskmasters” (Exod 3:7, ESV).

supplicants to move God to action and is never used for the person praying to ask God for a certain disposition such as patience. Given James's predilection for OT wisdom literature (see below), he most likely uses *κράζω* within that lexical framework of that literary corpus.

Second, and more specific to the context of Jas 5:1–6, since the rich oppressors (5:1) are the sole focus of James's scathing rhetoric, it seems most likely that the prayers of those who suffer at their injustice also focus on the rich oppressors instead of on an inward disposition of patience. To illustrate, note how James embeds the prayers of the harvesters (highlighted below with bold, italicized font) within a passage littered with second person plural verbs and pronouns directed toward the rich oppressors (underlined):

¹Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. ²Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. ³Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. ⁴Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. ***The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.*** ⁵You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. ⁶You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you. (Jas 5:1–6, NIV)

Again, all six verses focus on the rich oppressors, how they have failed, how God will judge them, etc. It seems most likely, therefore, that the harvesters' prayers (i.e. "the cries") also focus on the injustices of the rich oppressors and not on an inward disposition of patience. If so, then the unstated content of the harvesters' prayers, especially given the OT use of *κράζω*, would more likely be something akin to "Please, O Lord, rescue us from the hands of, and bring justice to, these rich oppressors" (a lament) than something akin to "Lord, please give us patience."

This is further supported, third, in light of the sentence just prior to the harvester's prayers: "The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you" (5:4a, NIV). Note the similarities between the cries of the harvesters in 5:4b and the personified wages in 5:4a: like the "cries of the harvesters," the "wages" that the rich owe to the oppressed are also "crying out against" the oppressors. The cries of these wages reflect a disposition of judgment; God will judge the oppressors because they have cheated the oppressed. The wages serve as evidence against the oppressors, and these wages are crying out against them. Implicit in the cries of these wages is a demand for the oppressors to change their habits, to start paying the oppressed what is owed. Succinctly, these cries are solicitations for change. The "cries of the harvesters" in the next sentence (5:4b) are also best understood in the same way; they are soliciting God for change, to stop the injustice. That is, the harvesters are lamenting.

Finally, 5:7–8 ("Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord . . . you also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand," ESV) makes most sense if 5:4b is a lament reference instead of a prayer solely for patient endurance. James 5:7–8, an encouragement to be patient amidst

suffering, is the response to the sufferers' prayer in 5:4b. If 5:4b is a prayer for patient endurance, then 5:7–8 seems redundant and superfluous, because if the harvesters in 5:4b are already praying for patience, then why would James encourage them twice in 5:7–8 to be patient? Why command patience to those who are asking God for it? If the sufferers are praying for patience in 5:4b, then the interchange that unfolds in 5:4b and 5:7–8 could be summarized like this:

Sufferers: "Please, O Lord, give us patience amidst the oppression of the wealthy" (5:4b).

God: I have heard your cries (5:4b)

James: Now be patient, because at the "Lord's coming" God will balance the scales of justice for you (5:7–8).

Again, why would James tell the oppressed to do precisely what they are already asking God for help to do? James 5:7–8 makes more sense if it serves as a response to lament instead of as a superfluous command to be patient, the interchange of which could be summarized like this:

Sufferers: "Please, O Lord, rescue us from the hands of, and bring justice to, these rich oppressors" (5:4b).

God: I have heard your cries (5:4b)

James: Now be patient, because at the "Lord's coming" God will balance the scales of justice for you (5:7–8).

The unstated prayers of the harvesters, then, are best understood as laments.

2. *James 5:13*. A second lament occurs in 5:13. James asks, "Are any among you suffering? They should pray" (NRSV). As in 5:4b, this is a lament reference with the content of the prayer left unstated. Most commentators suggest that the content of these prayers is likely the wisdom mentioned in 1:5, to have the wisdom needed to endure adversity.¹⁹

Two notable exceptions to this suggestion are Painter and deSilva. They argue that, though the content of the sufferer's prayer in 5:13 may include a plea for God to grant wisdom (and perhaps also to help with patience and endurance), it would be strange in this context if the prayer did not also include a petition for deliverance from suffering.²⁰ Such a petition is lament, though Painter and deSilva do not use this term. I suggest that their argument better explains the meaning of 5:13. However, they do not substantiate their argument. I propose that it is substantiated in light of the next verse (5:14), where James tells the sick person to ask the church elders to pray over him.²¹

The focus of the elders' prayers is for God to change the plight of the sick person and not for the sick person to have wisdom or patience. This is clear from

¹⁹ See Chris A. Vlachos, *James* (EGGNT; Nashville: B&H, 2013), 183.

²⁰ Painter and deSilva, *James and Jude*, 166,

²¹ "Sick" could mean "spiritually weak" but, according to Moo, it is "overwhelmingly likely" that it means physical illness (*Letter of James*, 236–37).

the context of 5:13 for three reasons: (1) in 5:15 God answers the elders' prayers by making "the sick person well" (NIV), thus indicating that the supplicants asked for healing; (2) in 5:16a, prayers offered for sick people are answered by God healing them, once again indicating that those who prayed asked for healing; and (3) in 5:4b, as just discussed, sufferers are encouraged to ask God to change their plights. Since the sick person in 5:14 asks for prayer to change his or her plight and not simply for wisdom or patient endurance, it is reasonable to assume that the sufferers in the previous verse (5:13) also pray for God to change their plight and not simply for wisdom or patient endurance. In other words, the sufferers in 5:13 lament.

In the previous section, I discussed how, in 1:2–18 and 5:7–8, James encourages his readers to patiently endure suffering. In this section, I demonstrate that, in chapter 5, James offers another approach for how his readers might deal with suffering: lament. Now I turn attention to how James appropriates both theologies together.

IV. PATIENT ENDURANCE AND LAMENT: PERSPECTIVE FROM JAMES'S BROADER THEOLOGY

On the one hand, James tells his readers to joyfully and patiently endure suffering; on the other hand, he advocates for lamenting to God for its removal. He encourages both of these two apparently conflicting postures while not explicitly saying how to synthesize them theologically or pragmatically. He does not, in other words, advise his readers how to navigate which type of prayerful response to use in the various situations of life. In fact, for James, these two postures do not even seem to be in tension at all. From my perspective as a modern, Western reader, however, they do indeed seem to conflict. Because of this perception, in my early reflections on these two Jamesian themes, I sought to synthesize them, to micro-cosmically attempt, within the confines of James's brief letter, a systematic theology of patient endurance and lament. Upon further reflection, I concluded it is unnecessary to resolve this tension because James does not resolve it. Though he offers no resolution, James implicitly provides informative theological perspective at the intersection of patient endurance and lament. By "theological perspective," I mean that if we explore patient endurance and lament within the context of James's broader theology, then certain theological affirmations and conclusions about this tension emerge. My purpose in this section, then, is to understand James's teaching about patient endurance and lament within the context of his broader theology, specifically in light of his teachings on wisdom, eschatology, and sin and obedience.²²

²² I assume, with Moo and others, (1) a consistent theology within James's letter (*Letter of James*, 8), a quite reasonable assumption within a relatively brief document, though not all commentators agree (see Dan G. McCartney, *James* [BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009], 58–59).

Wisdom is a prominent theme in James (1:5–8; 3:13–18), with many scholars generically classifying his work broadly alongside OT wisdom literature.²³ He defines heavenly wisdom as “pure, . . . , peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, [and] impartial and sincere” (3:17, NIV); and he defines satanic wisdom as jealous and selfish, earthly, unspiritual, and demonic (3:15–16). As I mention above, James specifically relates godly wisdom to patient endurance (1:1–12): it is wise for someone suffering to ask God for wisdom in how to endure it patiently (1:5). Presumably, every theological and ethical lesson that James affirms he would consider consistent with godly wisdom. For example, assuming James’s theological consistency, he believes that it is wise to “tame the tongue” (3:1–12), to avoid worldliness (4:1–12), and to trust God with the future (4:13–17). Continuing with this logic, he likewise believes it is wise sometimes to lament (5:4, 13). Both lamenting and patient endurance is consistent with James’s understanding of godly wisdom.

Eschatological victory also plays an important role in how James encourages his suffering readers to patiently endure. The sufferer should be patient “until the coming of the Lord” (5:7, ESV), because a reward awaits those who endure. James says it like this: “having stood the test, [the sufferer] will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him” (1:12, NIV). However, as noted above, practicing patience while waiting for the Lord’s guaranteed, triumphant eschaton and the reward that comes with it does not equate with prayerful silence before God; the sufferer can also lament to God for justice and relief while he/she awaits this reward (5:4b, 13). For James, certainty about eschatological victory does not, and should not, stop one from lamenting.

Daily struggle between sin and obedience is another prevalent theme in James. Temptation to sin does not come from God but from a person’s desire (1:13–18). Sins to be avoided in James include general disobedience that results from hearing the word without putting it into practice (1:19–27), anger (1:20), filthiness and wickedness (1:21), faith sans works (2:14–26), blasphemy (2:7), misuse of the tongue (3:1–12), worldliness (1:27; 4:4), selfishness (3:14), covetousness (4:2), praying with wrong motives (4:3), pride (4:6, 10), resisting submission to God (4:7–8), surrendering to the devil (4:7b), double-mindedness (1:8; 4:8), judging one’s neighbor (4:12), boasting about tomorrow and failing to trust God with the future (4:13–17), arrogance (4:16), and impatience (5:7–8). Failure at any one of these commands—or at any one point of the law—equates to sin against the whole law (2:10).²⁴ Because James endorses both patient endurance and lament, we can assume that James considers neither, at least in some circumstances, to be sinful in any way described above. For James, lament is part and parcel of a life lived in obedience to God.

²³ McCartney, *James*, 43. Moo rightly cautions, however, that James is not wisdom literature in the fullest sense of the term (*Letter of James*, 8, 33–34).

²⁴ I omit here the sins of partiality (2:1–13), murder (2:11; 4:2; 5:6), adultery (2:11), quarreling and fighting (4:1, 11; 5:9), and swearing oaths (5:12).

What perspectives, then, does James's broader theology shed on his understanding of patient endurance and lament? In a nutshell, James encourages patience amidst suffering but not prayerful silence about suffering. To use Eklund's phraseology discussed above, he encourages non-passive patience. According to James, there is a wrong way to pray: "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives" (4:3, NIV). But lament does not equate with this Jamesian wrong way of praying, because lamenting is not sinful. In fact, it is wise to lament, and to do so continually and persistently, which James indicates by using the present tense verb for "pray" in 5:13 (*προσευχέσθω*). This does not necessarily mean for James that God will immediately change the supplicant's dire situation. Patience is needed until the Lord's return at the eschaton, when the lament is fully answered and when justice finally reigns. Perhaps most comforting is that, whether God answers the lament now or later, he hears the lamenter, a fact underscored in 5:4b by James's use of the perfect tense: "The cries of the harvesters *have reached* [*εἰσεληλύθασιν*] the ears of the Lord Almighty."²⁵

V. CONCLUSION

Thus far I have identified the lament in James, explored it on the backdrop of his teachings about patient endurance, and situated both themes within his broader theology. Now I place James's lament within the context of Eklund's NT theology of lament discussed above, summarize the characteristics of the Jamesian lament, and offer some practical implications of his lament for the church today.

1. *James, lament, and the NT.* James's theology of lament represents a microcosm of Eklund's proposed NT theology of lament. Recall from above Eklund's argument that Jesus's life, death, and resurrection is the NT's answer to the OT lament; Jesus provides the assurance that God hears the lamenter. It might seem at first glance that a triumphant resurrection by the lamenter *par excellence* himself would eliminate the need to lament; after all, with a victorious future promised, why lament?²⁶ Believers still lament because this victorious future is not yet realized, much like Jesus who laments in Gethsemane (Matt 26:36–46) and on the cross (Matt 27:46) while fully aware of his own pending resurrection (Matt 16:21)²⁷ Because this triumphant future is not yet realized, NT Christians need patient endurance.

James's readers live precisely within this already/not yet eschatology. Jesus has already lived, died, and risen from the dead, and the Jamesian readers have accepted him as Lord (1:1). James tells his readers that, because of Jesus, their suffering is only temporal and that a crown awaits them at Jesus's return (1:12; 5:7). Because suffering is temporal, they can rejoice in it and endure it patiently. Yet be-

²⁵ Ralph P. Martin, *James* (WBC 48; Waco, TX: Word, 1988), 179.

²⁶ On Jesus as the lamenter *par excellence*, see Campbell, *Of Heroes and Villains*, 6–7, and Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll, *The Psalms of Lament in Mark's Passion: Jesus' Davidic Suffering* (SNTSMS 142; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 57.

²⁷ A fact insightfully mentioned prior to Eklund by Martin Ebner, "Klage und Auferweckungshoffnung im Neuen Testament," *JBTh* 16 (2001): 73–87.

cause they are yet to wear the victor's crown—because their victorious future is not yet realized—and since injustice still reigns, they lament. And God hears them. However, his complete answer to the lament is not yet fully realized. It will not completely arrive until the eschaton. In the meantime, James's readers, like those in the rest of the NT, are to endure patiently, but they are not to endure passively. Eklund's insights about the NT more broadly are apropos more specifically for James: the Jamesian lament is training in non-passive patience.²⁸

2. *Characteristics of Jamesian lament.* The characteristics of the Jamesian lament are multifaceted. Contrary to impressions that arise from myopically focusing on Jas 1:2, Christian suffering in James does not mute the lament; rather, he gives a bold voice to it. There is freedom to lament in James, even loudly and emotionally; and it is strongly encouraged. Lament, counterintuitively, does not displace joy. Just as Jesus can joyfully face the cross (Heb 12:2) yet lament to God about it (Matt 26:36–46; 27:46), Jamesian Christians are to have joy in the face of suffering (1:2) yet lament to God about it (5:4b). The content of James's laments are, on the one hand, specific; lamenters are to cry out to God against injustice and oppression by the rich (5:4b). On the other hand, lamenters can cry to God about suffering more generally (5:13). The Jamesian lament, like the broader NT lament noted by Eklund, is also characterized “by protest (against injustice and God's silence), trust (in God's justice), and by solidarity (with those who suffer).”²⁹

James, thus, advocates for a fluid prayer life that can and should meander freely between joyful praise and lamenting protest about suffering.³⁰ The temptation for modern, Western interpreters at this juncture is to view these two types of prayer on a continuum, suggesting that James's supplicants can either be on one side of this continuum or on the other but never both simultaneously. However, the notion of a linear continuum between joyful praise and lamenting protest is an anachronistic imposition on James. It is more accurate to understand James's theology of prayer through modern Asian eyes.³¹ Douglas Jacobsen insightfully summarizes the Asian perspective that I have in mind:

Westerners are taught to see objects and individuals as complete in and of themselves, while Asians are taught to see the world through the lens of relationships [between objects and people]. . . . For Asians, nothing makes sense all by itself; reality is defined by the connections that exist among things. . . . Asians recognize many dualities in the world (light and dark, high and low, hot and cold, life and death, male and female), but rather than seeing them as opposites, which is the tendency in the West, Asians see dualities as harmoniously linked pairs that constantly, endlessly interact without ever reaching a fixed or final resolution.³²

²⁸ Eklund, *Jesus Wept*, 172.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁰ This is predicated on a biblical understanding of joy (see S. S. Smalley, “Joy,” *NDBT* 609).

³¹ I gained this perspective partly by living and teaching for four years in China.

³² Douglas Jacobsen, *Global Gospel: An Introduction to Christianity on Five Continents* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 174.

Jamesian prayer, to use Jacobsen's phraseology, is best understood as a harmonious duality. For clarity, I am not suggesting that the *content* of the Jamesian prayer is akin to those in Asian philosophies. Rather, I simply mean that, at least when it comes to James's understanding of prayer, the fluidity of Asian insights provides a perspective that resonates with his first-century readers better than Western either-or dichotomies. In short, for James, lamenters can simultaneously be joyful, and the joyful can simultaneously lament.

3. *Significance for the church.* Hearing the voice of lament in James is important for today's church in several ways. First, for many sufferers, it is spiritually and prayerfully liberating simply to know of James's invitation to lament. Though James has, throughout church history, played a small role in academic circles (though this has recently changed), his impact on popular church life is pervasive. This practical "how to" letter, in ways similar to Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, resonates well with the practitioner of the faith and, therefore, is a favorite among pastors, youth ministers, small group leaders, and counselors. Central to this influence is James's perceived teaching on passive, patient endurance—toughing out suffering for God's glory.

Simply turning up the volume of James's lament, as I seek to do in this article, provides a more balanced theology of Jamesian prayer that helps prevent modern Christians from reading James as a document that advocates for *passive*, patient endurance instead of *non-passive*, patient endurance. Christians who are passing through life's dark valleys of oppression, injustice, sicknesses, and suffering will particularly be attuned to, and spiritually benefit from, the voice of lament in James. This benefit can exponentially increase if ministers within all disciplines (writers, preachers, singers, etc.) encourage their flocks both to "consider it pure joy" and to "[continually] cry out" to the Lord.

Also important for the church today is James's open-ended invitation to lament in 5:13: "Are any among you suffering? They should pray" (NRS). While OT psalmists invite suffering believers to lament within a relatively fixed literary framework and with words provided by the psalmists for the lamenter, while the Synoptic Gospels characterize Jesus as the OT lamenter *par excellence*, and while Paul says that he laments (2 Cor 12:8), James invites lamenters to compose their own laments.

The implications of this invitation for believers to compose their own laments are far-reaching. Accepting the invitation opens creative space for any number of ministers and ministries. How might Christians spiritually benefit if insightful and sensitive contemporary song and hymn writers and poets accept James's invitation? Maybe a whole litany of new laments will balance out modern praise music and devotions that focus almost exclusively on uplifting and encouraging Christianity. How might funeral attendees benefit from eulogists who accept this invitation? How deeply could healing flow for the hopeless drug addict who has turned the gun on himself? Victims of needless terror attacks might raise their own creatively lamenting voices alongside the martyrs in Revelation: "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (Rev 6:10, NIV). And the list could go on.

After every tragic mass shooting in America, Christians rarely, if ever lament; more problematic is that they fail to know that they even can lament.³³ Heeding James's invitation to lament can offer afresh to believers this legitimate, biblical category of prayer. Amidst exciting and exuberant praise and joyful adoration to his God, James does not silence the lament. Rather, he gives a resounding voice to it. For her own spiritual wellbeing, the church should also.

³³ Ottmar Fuchs and Bernd Janowski said the same thing about 9/11 back in 2001 ("Vorwort," *JBTb* 16 [2001]: v–vi). Little has changed.