

THE EPISTLE OF JAMES

Theme: "The Testing of Your Faith"

Lesson: 33

Text: 5:4

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Trinity Lutheran Church

Pastor David Nehrenz

www.tlcnorman.org



TEXT AND STUDY NOTES

(4) Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.

(Gen 2:1-3; 17:1; Lev 19:13; Dt. 24:15; 1 Sam 1:3; Is 5:9; 6:1-7; Jer 22:13; Zech 13:2; Mal 1:14; 3:1-6; Rom 9:29)

The name "LORD of hosts" occurs some 261 times in the Old Testament Scriptures. God is called the "LORD of hosts" in **1 Samuel 1:3**. The word LORD, capitalized, refers to Yahweh, the self-existent, redemptive God. The word "hosts" is a translation of the Hebrew word **Sabaoth**, meaning "armies"—a reference to the angelic armies of heaven.

Thus, another way of saying "LORD of hosts" is "God of the armies of heaven."

This name for God appears at the close of the period of the judges. In the same sentence as "LORD of hosts" is a reference to Shiloh, where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. The Ark symbolized Yahweh's rulership, among other things, for He sits enthroned above the cherubim (**1 Samuel 4:4; Psalm 99:1**). The "LORD of hosts" reaffirms that God is the true Leader of Israel's armies, in spite of the low spiritual condition of the nation of Israel at the time of the judges.

In **1 Samuel 17:45**, as part of his pre-fight verbal sparring with Goliath, David invokes this name of God. In doing so, David was claiming that God is the universal ruler over every force whether in heaven or on earth.

Soon after David's defeat of Goliath, Israel would enter the international scene. It was necessary for the nation to realize that Yahweh was King even of the many other mighty nations. This kingship of the LORD of hosts is vividly expressed in **Psalm 24:10**: "Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory!" He is the glorious King of Israel, and **Zechariah 14:9** tells us that He will be King of the world, over all the kingdoms of the earth (**cf. Isaiah 37:16**).

Eventually, Yahweh of armies will put down all rebellion (**Isaiah 24:21-23**) and establish His Kingdom from Mt. Zion (**Isaiah 31:4-5; 34:12**). As the LORD of hosts, God is the all-powerful Ruler over the entire universe. All power and authority are His. He alone intervenes to provide victory for His people. He alone brings world peace. At the same time, He is available to hear the prayers of His people (**Psalm 80:19**). There is no other God like this.

The LORD of hosts has the grace to always be there for the one who comes to Him through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The King of glory, who commands the armies of heaven and who will eventually defeat all His enemies in this world, is none other than Jesus Christ. He is the LORD of hosts (**Revelation 19:11-20**).

James’ statement about the underpaid laborers, “Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts” (5:4), is generally taken as a specific protest against social and financial injustice by rich and often absentee landlords. The Mosaic code has specific injunctions prohibiting theft from laborers by keeping back their fairly earned wages (Deut. 24:14-15). The question arises why James is concerned solely with deceptive farming practices. Why is he concerned with field

The similarity of James here to 1 Tim. 5:18 and Matt. 9:37 is striking. James 5:4, “the wages of the laborers (*ho misthos tōn ergatōn*),” bears a marked similarity to 1 Tim. 5:18 “The laborer deserves his wages (*axios ho ergatēs tou misthou autou*),” a section in which Paul is addressing the necessity of paying the clergy a salary. The section in James is also similar to Matt. 9:37, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few (*ho therismos polus, hoi de ergatai oligoi*),” a pericope speaking of the need for proclaimers of the Gospel and the establishment of what would later be called the pastoral office. The early church expressed God’s work in the Gospel with agricultural terms to such an extent that these terms were used without any further theological explanation. The parables of the sower and of the tares and the wheat with the final harvest (Matt. 13:3-8, 24-30) operate with this understanding. The participation of others with Jesus, especially the apostles, in this work of harvesting, that is, preaching, is assured by Him! “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest” (Matt. 9:37-38). In 1 Tim. 5:18 Paul uses the term “laborers” of those who along with the apostles hold the pastoral

The agricultural imagery of Jesus, in which He compared His work of converting, sanctifying, and judgment to planting, growing, and harvesting, was taken over by Paul to explain his work as a preacher of the Gospel in relation to other preachers and to God:

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are equal, and each shall receive his wages (*misthon*) according to his labor. For we are God’s fellow workers (*sunergoi*); you are God’s field (*geōrgion*), God’s building (1 Cor. 3:6-9).

Paul’s use of the agricultural imagery is more detailed, but James is addressing an audience for whom the agricultural terminology did not need the theological explanation. James’ readers were well acquainted and comprehended the original agricultural terminology of Jesus and without further explanation knew what James was talking about.⁴ Vv. 7 and 8 will make further use of this terminology.

James’ phrase, “Lord of hosts,” taken from Isaiah 6, is used of Jesus as God’s appointed Judge on the Last Day, as the title “Lord” (*kurios*) is the most appropriate for addressing Jesus in judgment (Matt. 7:21; 25:37). He may also refer to Himself as the Lord of the harvest to whom prayers are to be addressed requesting workers in that harvest (Matt. 9:38). What they have kept for themselves from those who justly earned it was only unnecessary luxury. They were fattening themselves as cattle for butchering on Judgment Day, when they would be slaughtered as God’s enemies (5:5).

LIFE APPLICATION

“The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.”
Nothing escapes the ears of God. How is this both terrifying and comforting?