

the devil's oppression. James warns against this most-common temptation to sin.

10 Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

SUMMARY James takes as his focus the last and final revival – awaiting Christ's return, and how it demands from us patience and utter faithfulness to what has been promised. While the enemy will be at work, attempting to sow disquiet and judgmental attitudes, we have to guard our unity and readiness for Christ as those expecting Him any moment.

APPLICATION It can seem insincere to speak of something happening when there is a lack of ready evidence to support it. Our evidence base does exist – it is Jesus, who died, rose again to new life and reminded the disciples that everything already written about Him must still be fulfilled, before ascending to heaven. How do we maintain this position two thousand years later? If we know Jesus, we will know that there is no separation between Him and His word.

QUESTION *What does living like those who know the Lord's coming is near, look like?*

PRAYER Father, at this time we look forward to celebrating Your Son's coming, incarnate as man, into this world. We look back, with praise and thanks, to what was a time of separation and change.

Help us to look forward to a time of even greater and more final change – when Jesus returns to rule and reign in all the world and its systems.

We know that at that time, all that does not already belong to You will be taken. And all that does belong, will be fully united and celebrated.

May Your Holy Spirit be especially active in us in this season, in our hearts and in our communities, shining His light on Jesus and leading us to bow the knee to Him in all of our ways and attitudes.

Amen.

"As an example... take the prophets" — many prophets were persecuted for their obedience in challenging the prevailing opinions of those around them, like Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah — and John the Baptist, imprisoned by Herod Antipas and then executed on a whim.

• **For further study**, read *Matthew 11:2, 14:8-12*.

The Living Word

Find the full version ONLINE at www.thelivingword.uk

PRINT EDITION

Bible readings for December 11, 2022, commentary & references

Non-denominational Bible study for **December 11** using Revised Common Lectionary readings
• Read the Bible passages beforehand. • Reflect. • Re-read later to think about the message preached

Theme: **Stages of revival in the promised coming of the kingdom**

Psalms 146:5-10

Isaiah 35:1-10 – Revival is like the bloom of the watered desert

Matthew 11:2-11 – Jesus praises His forerunner, the great prophet John

James 5:7-10 – Be patient and know the Lord's coming is near

Isaiah 35:1-10 – Revival is like the bloom of the watered desert

A highway of holiness over the rough places will lead seekers to the Lord

1-2 The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendour of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendour of our God.

"Desert and... parched land" — in earlier chapters of Isaiah, God has spoken of judgment for the nations, including fertile Edom becoming a desert, Isaiah 34:1-17. This includes Judah and Israel for their own rejection of God. This picture of the Messiah's reign is a complete reversal — the whole world as a garden.

3-4 Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, He will come with vengeance; with divine retribution He will come to save you."

"Your God will come" — the essence of the good news is God coming to save His people.

"Vengeance... divine retribution" — words that seem to conflict with a God whose overriding characteristic is mercy. In the preceding chapter, Isaiah 34:8, this was about God's justice in the context of Edom which had oppressed Israel at every opportunity. This is robust assurance to the faithful that their day will come.

• **For further study**, see *Isaiah 40:9; 52:7; 62:11; Rev. 22:12, 20*.

5-6 Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.

"Eyes... opened... lame leap... mute shout for joy" — unmistakable signs of the Messiah's appearance. Jesus quoted this passage when John's disciples asked if He was the Expected One, Matt. 11:4-5 (see below).

7 The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

"Thirsty ground" — the Arabah (Wadi Arava, south of the Dead Sea) is a difficult, rocky, arid

The Living Word online, with active links, an article and a video, is published during the week for the following Sunday

www.thelivingword.uk

also on medium.com/the-living-word and on Facebook — fb.com/TLWbiblestudy

For the weekly video: www.youtube.com, search for **The Living Word with Ian Greig**

also <https://thelivingword.substack.com> with podcast

See also <https://www.freshbread.today> for a less structured approach around a verse or short passage

Psalms 146:5-10

5 Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God.

6 He is the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them – He remains faithful forever.

7-8 He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets prisoners free, the Lord gives sight to the blind, the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down, the Lord loves the righteous.

9 The Lord watches over the foreigner and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but He frustrates the ways of the wicked.

10 The Lord reigns forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the Lord.

terrain with little rainfall — but rivers do exist deep in the rock and there are 'dry' rivers like the Nahal Paran which can flood widely. God's blessing in such a dry place is rain coming and rivers appearing.

8 And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way. The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it.

"A highway" — Isaiah saw a built-up level road across the wadis and rock outcrops, the Holy Way leading pilgrims to Zion. It represents a reversal of Isaiah 33:8, 34:10 when none could pass through.

9-10 No lion will be there, nor any

SUMMARY In contrast to earlier prophecies of judgment for disobedience, Isaiah shows that God has a parallel plan for a revival of His presence, His mission of salvation. The picture is like the sudden change in the desert following seasonal rain, the burning sand and inhospitable terrain greening over with growth, and hidden rivers appearing. Dormant spiritual life will be revealed in revival.

APPLICATION Desert conditions, applied to people's spirituality, is an absence of revelation, spiritual life and organic reproduction. A lack of revelation of God is caused by a lack of faith in God — and vice versa, compounding the difficulty. People of faith who are led to find 'the way of holiness' through the difficult, arid terrain and to dig for hidden water, will find their faithful efforts unrewarded.

QUESTION *At a time of declining church attendance and changing faith patterns, how should we be praying — and acting?*

Matthew 11:2-11 — Jesus praises His forerunner, the great prophet John

Yet Jesus says the humblest born-again believer ranks higher than him

2-3 When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask Him, "Are you the One who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

"John... in prison" — John the Baptist was imprisoned by the local Galilean ruler Herod Antipas for challenging the immoral relationship Herod had entered into with his half-brother's wife, Herodias. John and his followers were confused — this captive was not set free, the "baptism of fire" had not yet occurred, Isaiah 61:1; Matt. 3:11-12. Hence the question.

4-5 Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the

ravenous beast; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, and those the LORD has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

"Those the Lord has rescued" — the redeemed. The immediate picture is a safe and joyful homecoming from exiled captivity. Isaiah is also seeing beyond, to the sorrow-free time of final gathering of God's people into God's kingdom on earth.

• *For further study, see Isaiah 25:7, 51:11; Hebrews 12:22-24; Rev. 21:4.*

deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.

"Report... what you...see" — Jesus' priority with the needy of society and miracles that have been foretold are clear indications of His identity as the Christ, or Messiah. His quotation of Isaiah 35:5-6 and 61:1 would be clear to John, without Jesus prematurely declaring who He was to others.

6 "Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of Me."

"Stumble on account of Me" — John and his disciples were shaken in their faith by expecting a more majestic kind of Messiah, and a more instant outworking of John's prophetic words.

7 As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed

by the wind?

"A reed swayed" — a comparison with austere, unbending John, who cared little for public opinion; alternatively, with the politician Herod whose emblem for his coinage was a reed, like the 5m-high ones that grew on the banks of the Jordan.

8 "If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces.

9 "Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

"Fine clothes... a prophet" — many who claimed to be prophets in the former kingdoms of Israel and Judah were simply courtiers supporting corrupt leadership. John intentionally positioned himself as one like Elijah — who was no establishment figure.

SUMMARY John's ministry in the desert, encouraging people to be baptised as a way of sealing their repentance from sin and their re-dedication to God, gathered him a group of followers. Scripture references to the Messiah's majestic authority were confusing, both for John and his disciples, who found it difficult to separate spiritual authority from the more familiar authority of privileged birth or exalted position. Jesus pointed them to the signs, and to Isaiah's prophetic words about the signs, while praising John as the greatest prophet — and more.

APPLICATION Revival can be confusing for us, too, for similar reasons. We are often over-influenced by title and rank, and we look for signs of God doing what we have seen (or heard about) before, while failing to recognise new moves that do not fit 'our' pattern.

QUESTION *Think about some possible signs of God working in unlikely areas or ways, that we may have discounted before.*

James 5:7-10 — Be patient and know the Lord's coming is near

Keep unity of mind and voice and avoid judging others in the waiting season

7 Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains.

"Autumn and spring rains" — in a dry climate, these are critical watering times, seen as signs of God's faithfulness and blessing: autumn rain to germinate and establish, and spring rain to fill out the ear. The farmer saw the harvest coming in stages; so it is with the final harvest of the kingdom.

8 You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.

10 "This is the one about whom it is written: 'I will send My messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.'

11 "Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

"Born of women" — normal human birth, contrasted (by implication) with new birth into the kingdom of heaven.

"Not... anyone greater than John" — John was the last of the OT prophets and also Christ's forerunner, a unique role. Yet any born-again believer enters new life and becomes "greater" than John as part of the atoning work of Christ, something that John only saw in a shadowy way.

"Be patient and stand firm" — early believers had to maintain faith while enduring cruel treatment, in the expectation of Christ's imminent coming [parousia] when both oppressed and oppressors will receive their justice. Believers will be rewarded for their faithfulness, Proverbs 14:14, Matthew 5:12.

9 Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

"The Judge is... at the door" — the last days technically span any time period between Christ's ascension and second coming and it is a time of enemy activity, exploiting tensions to incite believers to sin and open themselves up to