

Sermon 19: James 5:7-12: Patiently Awaiting the Day of the Lord

INTRODUCTION

What is patience? Dictionary.com gives a well-accepted definition: 'the quality of being patient, as the bearing of provocation, annoyance, misfortune, or pain, without complaint, loss of temper, irritation, or the like. Synonyms [include]: sufferance, submissiveness, self-possession, stability, composure.' The Christian must inevitably be familiar with the idea of patience. God is patient towards us as sinners, is slow to anger and is in no rush to pour out His judgement but gives opportunity for sinners to be saved. Patience must be exercised towards difficult people in a world that hates Christ and His people; and difficult situations as we live in a fallen context awaiting a new creation. Patience is not natural to us and must be cultivated as a fruit of the Spirit. Patience and faith are both waiting for the unseen hope to arrive. The portion before us is all about patience. This section begins with a command, 'Be patient, therefore, brothers.' James you will remember has been rebuking the evil rich, and in 5:5 talks about a 'day of slaughter' where those who have been wicked oppressors will receive their retribution, in other words, judgement day. This causes James to call us to patience in light of the second coming of Christ. This will make up part of that uniquely Christian patience where we have different motivations for being patient to the ordinary person in the world. I see 7 aspects of how we patiently wait in light of Christ's second coming.

1. V7, Be patient in light of the second coming. 'Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord.' Although James used the opportunity to talk about being patient in light of the second coming using the segue of God's judgement upon the wicked. The question must be asked: is this the only situation in which James is calling us to be patient and look towards the Lord's return? It seems to me that James is writing to people who are suffering trials of 'various kinds' 1:2, and not only as poor being oppressed by the rich. This means that those who are suffering because of sickness, or bereavement, or poverty, or any number of difficulties can also apply these texts to themselves.

There are about 300 references to the second coming in the NT, that is about once every 26 verses, or more than once a chapter, or about eleven times per book of the NT. This is a major theme in the NT and a governing truth of the believer's life. It has an especially fitting place as we consider suffering. Thinking upon the second coming reminds us that suffering, in whatever form is temporary, Paul calls them 'momentary afflictions.' It also reminds us of the happy ending that awaits and puts our sorrows into perspective, Paul calls them 'light and momentary afflictions'; and 'not worth comparing to the glories that will be revealed in us,' as the children of God. The day of the Lord reminds us of the coming of the king to perfectly rule us, and the judge who will vindicate us and bring justice against all our enemies, ending all injustice permanently. It is a reminder that He will personally wipe away every tear and will be our inheritance and reward. It is also a reminder that we as believers will also be scrutinized, and our deeds tested by fire. We must not miss the nature of this call to patience, it is not a call to just put up with suffering with no promise of respite or purpose, no it is the assurance that one day all will be well. Present difficulties can feel heavy and permanent and irreversible and victorious, but remembering the second coming puts a lie to this perspective and gives us a second wind. There is an 'until' in v7.

2. Be patient like a farmer. V7b, 'See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains.' Farming is a strange mix of working and waiting. The farmer does not do nothing, he prepares the field, plants the seed, keeps out the weeds, chases away pests, maintains fences, but pre-irrigation a farmer also waited for the rain. The early and latter were the spring and autumn rains that Jews were familiar with in their season cycle. The fruit will come but an active waiting was part of every farmer's life. He could not speed the growth, he could not rush the days, he could not prematurely harvest. We are like that farmer. We are a mix of working and waiting. We scatter seed, we turn over soil, we remove weeds, we mend fences, we are on the watch for pests, and we are praying for God to give the increase; there is always work to be done on a farm, but we also look to God in prayer to bring the rains and the growth, and to bring the harvest to fruition. We do not see the harvest yet but we patiently and prayerfully wait. This is likely a call not to avenge themselves, not to arm themselves and take matters into their own hands, not to do anything rash, but to await God's vengeance. Rom. 12:19, 'Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

3. Be patient by establishing your hearts. V8, 'You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.' We can become discouraged, depressed, exhausted, angry and many other things as we experience difficulty. Asaph became envious of the wicked and early slipped in Ps. 73. Outwardly we can be trucking along but inwardly we are all doubt and resentment. We have to pay attention to what is under the hood, not only trying our best to be responsible and manage our situations, we must establish our hearts. We can make our hearts firm if we preach to them, filling them with truth, reminding them of God's promises who can never lie, fixing them upon the gospel realities of our justification, adoption, and certain glorification. This is a method James would have learnt from the psalms, 42:5-6, 'Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation⁶ and my God. My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you.' The issue we forget when it comes to our hearts is that you don't just do it once, daily we need to meditate, daily we need to pray, regularly we need the fellowship of the saints to encourage us, weekly we remember the Lord and His death for us, heart work is more like cleaning a house than building a house.

4. Be patient with each other. V9, 'Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door.' When we are under pressure, those closest to us bear the brunt of our outbursts. It seems that these believers were guilty of letting their discontentment from their hardships colour their relation with their brethren. The devil is trying to destroy us, as well as destroy our Christian unity as the church. He wants to undermine our personal and collective witness. He is never happier than when we are against each other, because then we are not putting our energy into our primary task. These believers were quick to anger and quick to speak, it seems that the sins of the tongue and their reactions to difficulty are linked. Were the poor brethren complaining that the rich were not helpful enough; were the rich complaining that the poor were constantly looking for handouts? We don't know. Peter talks about showing hospitality without grumbling, 1 Pet. 4:9. You can imagine what that looks like: we provided meat but they only provide soup; we had 20 people over to our house but they only have one other family; we open our homes all the time they hardly ever do.... Grumbling comes in many shapes

and sizes. Related to suffering it could be envious criticism; rash judgmentalism; blame; bitter gossip and slander. When we are having a hard time of it everyone becomes target practice, hence the need for patience. Sometimes our criticisms may be legitimate sometimes not, longsuffering is still the path to walk.

James reminds them not to grumble against one another, and because the judge is at the door. Once again the realities associated with the second coming have a bearing on our lives, this time that fact that even believers give an account and have their works tested should have a restraining effect upon our actions. Because we know that every word will be weighed, grumbling should be cut off.

5. Be patient by imitating the prophets. V10, 'As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.' James has pointed to the farmer as an example of faithful waiting, now he points to the OT prophets. He does not single any prophet out in particular but we can fill in the gaps. They can be spoken of as a group in general because they were mistreated in general, Stephen sums it up well, Acts 7:51b-52, 'As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered.' See also Matt. 5:12-13; 23:29-36. Or just think of Jeremiah famous for suffering: Jeremiah beaten and put in the stocks Jeremiah 20:1-2; was falsely charged to have the death penalty applied to him, 26:11. Jeremiah was cast into a well and left to die in the mud, 38:6; disregarded and called a liar when he was telling the truth for their good, 43:2. And yet he was faithful, and yet he declared the word of the Lord, and yet he would not recant his words and held fast. This is helpful for me because today we sometimes talk about the church having a prophetic calling. Many want to coopt the church into the role of John the Baptist putting his finger in Herod's face. Many want a vocal church that is united as a culture shaping force that speaks truth to power (leftist version); or truth to lies (rightist versions). When James is calling us to imitate the prophets it is in their faithful suffering not a revolutionary vocal outrage. In Hebrews 11 their faith filled dying and suffering is used as a cloud of witnesses to urge us to lay sin aside and endure difficulty. The primary use of the example of the prophets in the NT is not to justify an angry criticism of the evils of society but a faithful suffering.

6. Be patient like Job. V11, 'Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.' We are encouraged to think of the example of Job. Now Job is a mixed bag. We know that he started well, some of the greatest words of faith in the face of suffering are Job's, shall we accept good from the Lord and not evil; the Lord gives and the Lord takes away blessed be the name of the Lord. Job did however demand answers of God not trusting that He knows how to run the universe even in the lives of those who have done nothing to deserve suffering. And Job was less than patient with his friends who insisted that he must have done something wrong. James is obviously commending Job where he is good not his weaknesses. Job retained his faith. Now in v11 James tells us that that we consider those who remain steadfast as blessed. He has already told us in 1:12, 'Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.' those who are steadfast are blessed because after this painful time of testing to approve the genuineness of our faith there is a crown of life. The blessedness abides in the joy at the end of the trial. This is the carrot that is help out to us to encourage us to

persevere. Job suffered much but there was a good end for him, 42:10, 'And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job, when he had prayed for his friends. And the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before.' This is the purpose of God for us in our difficulties. James calls upon us to remember the character of God as compassionate and merciful and not rely on some slanted ascription of motives to God that flow from our bitterness and anger. Do you know that the Lord is compassionate and merciful? God was not indifferent to the cries of His people when they were oppressed in Egypt, but heard their cries. We see evidence of God's goodness in creation, Ps. 145:8-9, 'The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made.' But the greatest demonstration of God's compassion and mercy and His willingness to bring an end to our suffering is seen in the cross. We are sinners who have brought judgement upon ourselves, if God treated with us according to justice we should all suffer more than we do. But God instead sends His Son, He endures suffering, He pays the bill in full, He secures an end to all suffering and He adopts us to shower riches greater than we can conceive upon us. When we step back and think of the larger purposes of God in light of His overarching plan to save and make new, this gives us a clear sight of God's goodness we lose sight of when we are in the valley of our suffering.

7. Be patient and have integrity. V12, 'But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your "yes" be yes and your "no" be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.' Now this verse has presented some difficulty to interpreters. We are aware that James does dramatic gear changes, though they always follow the themes of the tongue, false religion, and suffering. The question here is, does v12 belong to the discussion about patience in suffering or the closing remarks from v13 till the end. Our translations have put it in a paragraph break to indicate this difficulty. Personally I am happy to take it as a further application of how to be patient while suffering. Firstly because the suffering theme does continue in the closing section, but also because rash vows are easily imagined in a context where people are suffering. When we suffer we bargain with God and can make oaths and promises to try and get God to remove our suffering. Generally speaking I believe that James is calling upon these suffering believers to live as people of integrity in tough times. In order to understand this we need to appreciate the broader teaching on oaths and vows.

In the OT God commanded the Israelites to take oaths in God's name. Their fear of Him would be the basis for their truth-telling. He would be glorified as they took oaths and fulfilled them because it showed that He is worthy to be feared by honouring promises in His name. God himself swore by Himself. These facts show that there is nothing sinful in the act itself. But come the time of the NT and the ministry of Jesus, things have changed. James is clearly referring to the teaching of Jesus from places like Matt. 5:33-37, '"Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.' As with other parts of the sermon on the mount the language of Jesus teaching is rhetorically 'hot' cut off hands, gouge out eyes, turn the other cheek, give to anyone who asks. Some have taken these words literally and have foregone all swearing and

oaths whether it is marriage vows, vows of office, or oaths in court. Is this what Jesus and James are advocating? The consensus of the Reformed church is no, there is even a chapter on solemn oaths and vows in our confessions. Jesus and Paul both accepted the situation where they were bound under oath to tell the truth in a legal setting. Paul regularly calls upon God as witness to testify that what he says is the truth. Jesus teaching, and now James is addressing a very Jewish abuse. Many Jews had learnt the art of lying by giving a qualified oath, Jesus exposes this hypocritical promise making in Matt. 23:16-22, “Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.’”¹⁷ You blind fools! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that has made the gold sacred?¹⁸ And you say, ‘If anyone swears by the altar, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gift that is on the altar, he is bound by his oath.’”¹⁹ You blind men! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that makes the gift sacred?²⁰ So whoever swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it.²¹ And whoever swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it.²² And whoever swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who sits upon it.’ It is against this practice that Jesus tells His disciples to be people of integrity. That their word should be enough. James is drawing upon this understanding and calling upon God’s people not to be , bargainers with God, or liars, or perjurers, or manipulators with dramatic vows, but people of integrity. When the pressure is on we can lie, cowardice and the fear of man is one of the great temptations we all face and that drive our lying. Let us be people who are fearless in telling the truth without prevarication.

So how do we be patient in suffering? 1. Be patient in light of the second coming. 2. Be patient like a farmer. 3. Be patient by establishing your hearts. 4. Be patient with each other. 5. Be patient by imitating the prophets. 6. Be patient like Job. 7. Be patient and have integrity.