

“Beautiful Patience”
James 5:7-12
September 10, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

James is continuing to develop the theme of humility that he introduced in 4:6. *God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.* He describes here one more feature of the kind of humility that brings God’s grace to us. It is the quality of patience. A humble person waits patiently for God to act, while the proud person grumbles, despairs or becomes dishonest. The word “patient” or “patience” is used four times in our passage, the word “wait” once and different forms of the word “steadfast” twice. There is a slight difference between being patient and steadfast. A patient person accepts without anger unwanted, unpleasant situations, and a steadfast person endures under the pressure of such situations.

Would others describe you as being patient? Patience and steadfastness are tested by both minor irritations and significant evils. Are you patient with the minor irritations of life? I find that such irritations are abundant, which means that the opportunities are many each day to trust God and be patient instead of becoming angry. When driving your car, you are stopped at a light behind someone who has their head down looking at a phone and who doesn’t notice that the light has turned green. They finally notice just in time to get through the light themselves, but not in time for you to get through it, forcing you to wait for another cycle of the light. Someone in your household doesn’t load the dishwasher the way you think it needs to be loaded. We could go on and on, but you get the idea. There are a multitude of minor irritations in daily life that call for patience.

There are also significant evils in life that call for patience and steadfastness. As your pastor, I am privileged to be brought into many of these areas in your lives. Some of you suffer from debilitating and painful physical conditions. Others of you bear up under significant financial pressure. There are struggles with jobs, marriages, children or parents, just to name a few. There is a beauty in a response of patience and steadfastness to these things. It is the beauty of humility and a quiet trust in God. Such a quality is probably best taught by way of illustration, and James gives us three examples of patience in this passage: the farmer, the prophets and Job.

I. The Patience of the Farmer – v. 7-9

The picture of an impatient farmer is somewhat ridiculous because it never happens. No farmer would plant his seed one day and expect a harvest the

next. It would never happen that he would angrily call the seed company and demand his money back because of not getting an immediate harvest. It would also not happen that he would angrily plow under the first growth of seedlings because of the same lack. No, farmers learn to be patient. The only way they are ever going to see a harvest is to wait for it. Though waiting is not all they must do, it is an indispensable part of what they must do.

James also highlights the fact that farmers learn to distinguish between what they can control and what they cannot control. They can control certain aspects of planting, such as when and how to plant, and certain parts of cultivation, such as weeding the crops. But there are other essential parts of a fruitful harvest over which they have no control, but which are essential, such as rain. We are to be patient like the farmer, being diligent in the things we can control, but waiting on God's timing for all the things beyond our control.

Notice that James mentions the coming of the Lord twice in this passage where he commands patience. He says to be patient **"until the coming of the Lord"** (v. 7). And then he says that our hearts will be strengthened as we remember that **"the coming of the Lord is at hand"** (v. 8). There are at least two things taught by this, one negative and the other positive. The negative is that we are to expect the kind of suffering that requires patience until the Lord returns. We are to be patient until the Lord returns, after which we will no longer have need of patience. But until then, minor inconveniences will be abundantly present in our lives, as well as occasional significant evils. We are to meet both with patience.

Notice the presence of the word "therefore" in verse 7, a word that points to what precedes this command. James was talking in the previous passage about the unbelieving rich, who were guilty of withholding wages to their workers and who lived in luxury while those who could have been helped by their generosity were going hungry. Among James' readers were likely poor Christians harmed by these injustices, and James wants them to know two things. First, they are to respond with patience, knowing that until Jesus returns, such suffering is inevitable.

There is a second thing he wants them to know. Jesus will return and he will judge all their oppressors and put an end forever to all suffering. It is only as they lay hold of this hope that their hearts will be strengthened unto patience. Let's think a little more about this return of the Lord that James says is such a vital part of our patience. And let's apply it to the catastrophic hurricanes we have witnessed recently. Are these weather events caused by human activity? The Bible states clearly that the answer to that is "Yes." The earth is under a curse because of the sin of Adam, and things such as hurricanes and floods are part of this curse. We can expect that they will continue until the Lord returns. The good news is that the end of all hurricanes and any other tragedy of nature will also come by the hand of a man, the God-

man Jesus. When he returns, the curse will be lifted and nature will return to its original glory. We have been reading in our family devotions recently from Psalm 96 and 98. Listen to some of these verses. **“Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice, let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth”** (96:11-13). Or consider Psalm 98:7-9. **“Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who dwell in it! Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth.”** Shouting fish, singing trees and mountains, and rivers clapping their hands—all this will happen when the Lord comes. Nature will come alive. The ancient harmony between humanity and nature will be restored. In his prayer in the daily devotions in the psalms, Tim Keller prays this after Psalm 98. “Lord, I once thrilled to hear tales in which trees and animals could talk, magic helped people escape death and the ravages of time, and love triumphed over evil. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we will be too, and all these things will be ours. Let me live all day in the joyful hope of my final rising.” It is because of this hope that James brings up the return of Jesus.

Why does James say that Jesus’ return is at hand? He wrote that almost two-thousand years ago and Jesus still hasn’t returned. Was James mistaken? Peter gives us the answer in his second epistle, saying that the Lord’s time is different from ours. **“With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day”** (2 Peter 3:8). It’s like the difference between Narnia time and earth time, if you’ve ever read C. S. Lewis’ Narnia Chronicles. So from God’s perspective, the Lord’s return is at hand. Peter goes on to say something else that helps us be patient for his return. He says that the reason for God’s seeming delay in returning is his own patience, **“not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance”** (3:9). God could end all the suffering of his children immediately by his return today. But he delays in order to give time for people to come to him in repentance and faith.

In this context of patience, why does James bring up the topic of grumbling? He does so because grumbling is a form of impatience. When we are being impatient, we complain about our suffering instead of accepting it from God’s hand. Why then does he speak of grumbling against one another instead of the expected grumbling against God? When we are being impatient, it sours our whole attitude, and such a soured attitude inevitably gets directed to those around us. Impatience destroys community, and James warns us that those who do so will be judged by the Lord upon his return. God’s children are not in view here, but James is saying that we want to make sure we are not among that number who must face God as Judge. It is our patience that gives evidence that we are not among that group. Instead, we are among those who humbly trust God and accept what he brings to us for as long as he chooses to bring it to us.

II. The Patience of the Prophets – v. 10-11a

James' second example of patience is the prophets of the Old Testament. They suffered because of their faithfulness in speaking God's word in their generation. They could have saved themselves a great deal of suffering had they been willing to back off just a little from that truth, but they remained faithful and steadfast. We've already considered one form of impatience in the previous point, that of complaining about suffering rather than accepting it as coming from God's hand. Here's another form of impatience, shown to us by the example of the prophets: compromising our faithfulness in order to avoid suffering.

James doesn't tell us which prophets he had in mind, probably because it didn't matter. Choose any one and you will see someone who suffered because of the truth being proclaimed. And they chose to remain faithful, though doing so was the direct cause of their suffering. We could mention Jeremiah, who was accused of treasonous behavior because of his prophetic warning that the Babylonians would succeed in their conquest of Jerusalem. There was such anger against him that the men of his hometown sought to kill him. On one occasion, they threw him into a cistern, intending that he should die of thirst or starvation after much suffering. There was no water in the pit, only mud, into which Jeremiah sunk. It was not unlike being buried alive. His life was saved only by the intervention of an Ethiopian eunuch by the name of Ebed-Melech. Or we might think of Ezekiel, whose wife was taken from him as an object lesson to unfaithful Israel. He was then told not to mourn or weep for her, just as there would be no mourning when Israel lost their temple.

These prophets could have ended their suffering through compromise, but remained faithful and steadfast instead. James says that they are blessed in doing so. Are you impatient with suffering to the point that you compromise faithfulness in order to avoid the suffering? Let me mention one application of this that has come to my attention lately. Our church, like any church, requires a large number of volunteers in order to fulfill our mission and calling. God has blessed us with many hard-working and faithful volunteers. But in recruiting volunteers, we find that there are plenty of people willing to volunteer for the jobs that are straightforward and involve little uncertainty and messiness. In other words, these are jobs that really don't require much trust in the Lord. They are the jobs that never leave a person with that uncomfortable feeling of not knowing what to do and having to call out to the Lord. In a word, they are jobs that don't require much suffering. The jobs that do make more demanding requirements upon people are the ones we have the most trouble filling. I understand that. Honestly, we are all a bit that way, of not wanting to put ourselves in a position where we have to trust the Lord. But that is not the position where patience and steadfastness will be built. That's what the prophets teach us. I like the way Kent Hughes words this. "It is hard

to learn to swim on dry land, but when we are in the water you *have* to swim. Our troubles are waters in which we are obliged to swim toward God.”

III. The Patience of Job – v. 11b-12

The final example of patience is Job. Here James uses the word “steadfastness” to describe Job. Job may seem at first glance to be a questionable example. After losing all his property, his children and his health, he lamented the day of his birth, complained that he deserved none of this and demanded that God explain himself. Why is Job a good example of steadfastness? He’s a good example for the simple reason that he keeps going and doesn’t give up. We have already seen two examples of impatience in our previous two points: complaining and unfaithfulness. Here’s a third—giving up. Job didn’t give up. His wife spoke foolishly to him urging him to do just that, to give up. **“Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die”** (Job 2:9).

James points out what we should learn from Job’s steadfastness. **“You have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful”** (v. 11). In the story of Job, we see that God has a purpose in Job’s suffering. We see that purpose at the end of the story. It wasn’t greater prosperity, even though Job in fact was given greater prosperity. Rather, God’s purpose is seen in something Job says. **“I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; there I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes”** (Job 42:5-6). Job came to know God in a deeper sense, leading him to repentance. That is the blessing that comes from our steadfastness when we suffer. Don’t give up. Let the suffering take the course God has designed it for, to sanctify your heart.

CONCLUSION:

The final verse of our text seems at first not to fit in this context of patience. Why does James transition to talking about the taking of an oath? He’s concluding his discussion of patience by talking about honesty. He does so in the same way Jesus did, by giving a warning concerning the misuse of oaths (cf. Matt. 5:33-37). Both James and Jesus are talking about the practice current in their day to make fine distinctions about when they were speaking under oath and the rest of the time. He cuts through the Gordian knot of all that and tells them simply to be honest. How does that relate to patience? It does so like this. Dishonest people make up their own reality, while honest people deal with the reality that is. Patient people deal with reality as it is, looking to God in faith.