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James 5:7-12

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THE WISDOM OF PAINFUL PATIENCE

SERIES: RESPONDING TO THE PRESSURES OF LIFE

There is something within us that cries out for justice and resolution. No matter how tired we are of hearing about the O.J. Simpson trial, we still would like to know the truth so that there could be a just closure. The mystery surrounding the death of the little six-year-old girl in Colorado troubles us. We want the truth out in the open; we want the guilty party to be dealt with appropriately. Bill Cosby has said that he wants an airtight case against the killer of his son. He doesn't want events to be shrouded in mystery or to have evidence questioned.

Life has too many mysteries for our liking, especially when it comes to unjust actions and undeserved suffering. Our hearts cry out for resolution. We want things to make sense, to follow logical patterns of cause and effect. If someone does good, he or she should be rewarded. If someone breaks the law, there should be swift and appropriate justice. Hollywood has conditioned us to think this way. The bad guys look like they have won the day, but then the superhero arrives and everything is resolved in a nice neat package.

But life is not that simple. We ponder the difficult questions: Why did that airplane crash? Why are so many people starving in Africa? Why did that act of fraud go unpunished? We reflect on the mysteries of our own lives: How did I end up with this particular family? Why did I lose my job? Why did I lose my child? We would like God to put everything in order and make things clear. Life presents us with many more questions than answers. One thing we can be sure of is that no one is exempt from trials and suffering.

Knowing this, how should we live in the midst of these tensions? Why do we have to? In our studies in the book of James, we have been looking at the pressures and temptations brought about by trials, unfair treatment, oppression and suffering. Recently we have been discussing how the world deals with these pressures and temptations. We have looked at anger, pride, and friendship with the world. In our last two studies we have discussed the boastful man and the rich man. Some people try to control the future through pride and boasting; others try to avoid the pains of life by striving to become wealthy, even at the expense of others. James has pointed out the extreme folly of these approaches to life. The boastful man is foolish to think that he can control the future through his own efforts; the rich man stores up a poison for his judgment in the last days.

So once again we are faced with the question: How should we counter our more natural reactions to trials and suffering? After addressing the boastful man and the rich man, in verse 7 of chapter 5 now, James turns to the brethren, to Christians. Remember the literary structure of the text. In verse 13 of chapter 4, James writes: "Come now, you who say." In verse 1 of chapter 5, he writes: "Come now, you rich." But here, in verse 7 of chapter 5, he begins by saying: "Now therefore, brethren." What follows are his instructions as to how brethren should live. Chapter 5, verse 7:

Be patient therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being

patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains. You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not complain, brethren, against one another, that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door. As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful. (James 5:7-11 NASB)

James begins with a series of commands and exhortations. He sets out the motivation for Christians to live this way, giving us both vision and assurance in the process. We begin by noticing four very important words that stand out in our text.

The apostle's first exhortation is to be "patient." This key word occurs four times here. The Greek word is made up of two words, one meaning "wrath" or "anger," the other meaning "far away." To be patient means to "put anger far away." In the Old Testament, this word is translated "longsuffering" or "forbearance." Frequently, the term is used to describe God. God withholds or restrains his righteous wrath with a view toward men and women coming to repentance. The same theme is reiterated in the New Testament. The theme is not renunciation but postponement. God's longsuffering is not swayed by emotions, but it very purposeful. We know that patience describes is an attribute of love (1 Corinthians 13); and it is one of the fruits of the Spirit listed by Paul in Galatians 5.

Patience is commanded by James because we can become angry at others and at God because of the seeming unfairness of life. The wicked seem to prosper. Faith in God does not result in pleasant circumstances. There seems to be no correlation between obedience and God's protection from the harsh things that oppress us. So we tend to respond in one of two ways. We cry out to God to come quickly so that he can even the score. We regard God as a cosmic referee who will level the playing field and put things in a way we can understand. Or we can take matters into our own hands. If God won't do anything about our circumstances, then we think it is up to us to bring order and balance. We take God's position and hand out divine sentences that seem appropriate to us for injustice suffered.

But James says we are to be "patient until the coming of the Lord." For those of you who attended our men's retreat, this seems to contradict what we heard last weekend. At the retreat we learned about venting our frustrations to God, because he is big enough to handle them. And this is a good place to start. Being patient doesn't mean that we are passive or fatalistic. But this is only part of the process. At some point we have to stop talking and begin listening, even though God seems slow to respond and circumstances have not changed. James has already said that the anger of man does not accomplish the righteousness of God. Ultimately we are called to patience.

James gives two reasons why we should be patient. First, the Lord is coming, and he will bring justice. Don't take matters into your own hands. Listen to the words of Peter: "But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up" (2 Pet 3:8-10).

We have to watch out lest we become so frustrated with the slowness of God and the injustice of circumstances that we put ourselves in God's place and start administrating his divine wrath and judgment. There is a difference between expressing angry feelings and assuming God's wrath. We are to be patient, knowing that the Lord is coming and everything will be taken care of. On that day, those who thought they were getting away with something will find their worst nightmare coming true. One that day it will not matter whether O.J. Simpson was convicted of a crime here on earth. If he murdered these people, then he will face God's wrath—and that will be worse than anything he will face here on earth.

Things will not make complete sense until the Lord comes. And make no mistake about it, that day will come. In Psalm 73, Asaph, the psalmist, expresses his frustration and anger at the prosperity of the wicked, but that was before he saw their end:

**When I pondered to understand this,
It was troublesome in my sight
Until I came into the sanctuary of God;
Then I perceived their end.
Surely Thou dost set them in slippery places;
Thou dost cast them down to destruction.
How they are destroyed in a moment!
They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors! (Ps 73:16-19)**

The second reason we must be patient is that God is waiting for the fruit in our lives to grow to full maturity. Just like a farmer waits patiently for the early and late rains so that his crop can mature, so also we are waiting with God for the completion of what he has begun. In the Bible, oftentimes rain is used as a symbol for the work of the Spirit. In this case, God is the farmer and we are the soil. He has sowed his Word into our hearts, and he has supplied the early rain. The fruit that is growing is the fruit of the Spirit—spiritual character—or as James says in chapter 3, the "wisdom from above." But now God is waiting for the late rains for the full harvest. We are to understand this process and wait patiently with God for the fruit to become mature.

But we are more likely to wait anxiously for God because we are frustrated with injustice, oppression, and suffering. Have you ever thought about the fact that God is waiting for us? He is being very patient, waiting for the fruit of spiritual maturity to grow in our lives so that we will be fit and ready to spend eternity with him.

Consider a newly planted vineyard. A good wine cannot be made from the first year's harvest of grapes. Ten years may pass before the new vines can produce a good wine. But once the vines age, then they will produce excellent grapes for many years. In the same way, spiritual maturity takes time; and God is waiting for that fruit to grow in our lives.

The second word in our text is "strengthen." The idea here is to support, fix firmly, or establish. In the Hebrew, the idea is to "set one's face, to fix one's eyes." This is what Jesus did when he set his face to go up to Jerusalem. The opposite of strengthen, however, is to be unstable and weak, undecided, without direction.

In the context of this letter, Christians are to wait patiently in the midst of suffering for the Lord's coming. As we are waiting, we are to establish our resolve, to be firm in our understanding as to what is happening at the moment and what will happen in the future. The implication is that we wait actively, not passively. We are not to adopt a defensive position; we must take the offense, actively trusting that God is doing something much bigger than anything we can see. Life is unfair. Many people suffer unjustly. But we know that is part of God's plan for us to come to full maturity. We are committed to allowing him to use suffering to perfect us. We are resolved to not seek friendship with the world and not favor the rich as a way of dealing with our problems and struggles. If we do not strengthen our hearts in this way, and if we doubt what God is doing, then we will be "driven and tossed by the wind, unstable in all our ways." In 1 Thessalonians, Paul exhorts Christians to love, "so that He may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus" (1 Thess 3:13).

The third command has to do with our relationships with others within the body of Christ. James instructs us: "do not complain." Since the command is given in the present tense, it could be rendered: "stop complaining." "Complain" means to sigh or groan. We groan because of oppression, which causes suffering, and we want to be free from that. In 2 Corinthians, Paul says that in this body we groan because we long for our heavenly abode. In Romans, we learn that we groan along with creation, waiting for the new heavens and the new earth and the transformation of our bodies.

Here in this letter, the deep groanings of the brethren resulting from suffering were causing tension within the family of God. In chapter 4, we learned that this led to conflicts and quarrels. One consequence of suffering is that it causes family breakdown, both in the church and in the home. We become impatient and we take out our frustrations on others. We try to control them. We point out their weaknesses. We judge one another's motives. We get angry at someone who has more than us or who suffers less than us. We grow critical and condemning. We expect other people to solve our problems.

James commands us to stop this behavior. The fact that we are oppressed, mistreated and cheated is never an excuse to lash out and take matters in our own hands, to take the place of God in seeing that others pay for their crimes.

Again, the reason we must stop complaining is the fact that the Lord is coming to judge. Complaining is judging, and we are not to judge one another lest we ourselves be judged. The real Judge is coming, and if he finds us judging, then he will judge us on the same basis as we are judging others. Listen to the words of Paul: "And so, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you" (Col 3:12-13).

There is another word in our text that bears consideration. Technically, it is not a command, like the command to be patient, to strengthen or stop complaining. However, this word "endurance"

(which is repeated five times in this letter) helps to fill out how we are to respond to suffering. The word literally means to “remain under,” “to stay behind.” It carries the idea of patient expectation, of waiting on God. The wicked abandon hope in God; the ones who endure to the end will be saved. According to James, trials produce the quality of endurance, and endurance produces perfect character. Paul makes the same point in Romans 5. The seed that is sown in good soil, “these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance” (Luke 8:15) with endurance. Our model is Jesus. He endured the cross, despising the shame.

But this is not our natural response to suffering. Instead, we run, we hide, we groan, we complain. We try to escape the pressure as quickly as possible. And yet the word of God continually exhorts us to stay under the pressure and allow suffering to do the work that God wants it to do so that our character will be made perfect. This is the ultimate purpose behind many things we encounter in life. Life doesn't seem fair, but God works on building character in us through the intense heat of trials and suffering.

This then is the word James gives to believers: Put wrath far away, strengthen your hearts, stop complaining, remain under the pressure. All of these things run counter to the way the world operates. Patience can be painful, but this is what God calls Christians to.

Our motivation for following these instructions, given three times in the text, is that the Lord is coming. For James, the return of the Lord is a much planned for, anticipated event. It is the next event, and it for this that he longs. In the same way that we look forward to things like skiing, spending a day at the beach, going to a birthday party, graduating, getting married, receiving a bonus check or reaching the end of a difficult season in life, James anticipates the coming of the Lord.

This hits me hard. It is not something that we reflect on very much in connection with trials. But James does. This forces us to ask ourselves: What are we here for? All too often we try to seek resolution, justice, satisfaction and fairness in this life. If we can't achieve these, then the least we will settle for is getting ahead of everyone else. But this is an extremely shortsighted approach. The reason we get so frustrated and angry with our circumstances is because we are trying to build our permanent home here on earth. Suffering keeps us from getting what we want. James is pointing out that anything less than living in and for the age to come will bring disappointment. This is the only thing that will profit as we try to decipher the mysteries of suffering and injustice.

I am reminded of the story of the elderly missionary couple who were coming home to the United States after many years of obscure service in Africa. They had no pension plan. Their health was broken. They were defeated and discouraged. When they boarded the ship to come home, they discovered they were on the same boat as President Teddy Roosevelt, who was returning from a hunting expedition. As they boarded, no one paid any attention to them. However, when the President boarded, a band played and crowds gathered. The missionary said to his wife, “Something is wrong. Why should we give all those years in Africa and have no one care about us? And everyone makes such a fuss over this one man returning from a hunting expedition.” His wife told him that he shouldn't feel that way and that he shouldn't be bitter. But he said, “I just can't help it; it doesn't seem right. After all, if God is running this world, why does he permit such injustice?”

As the boat neared New York, the man grew more depressed. When the ship docked, a band was waiting to greet the President. The mayor of the city and other leaders gathered to greet him. But no one noticed the missionary couple. They slipped off the ship quietly and found a cheap flat on the East side, hoping the next day to see what they could do about earning a living in the city. That night the man's spirit broke. He said to his wife, “I can't take this. God is not treating us fairly. We don't even know anyone to help us. If God is faithful, then why doesn't he meet our needs?” His wife replied, “Why don't you go into the bedroom and talk to Lord about it.” After a short time, he came out of the bedroom, but his face was completely different. His wife noticed immediately and asked what happened. “Well, the Lord settled it with me. I went in and knelt down beside the bed and poured everything out to him. I said, ‘Lord, it isn't fair.’ I told him how bitter I was that the President should receive this tremendous homecoming, when no one met us as we returned home. And when I finished, it seemed the Lord put his hand on my shoulder and simply said, ‘But you're not home yet.’”

We are to be patient and endure, because this world is not our home. The thing that motivates us to respond to trials with patience is the fact that the Lord is coming to take us home.

James gives two examples of patience, one general, one specific, for our encouragement. The prophets had a special place in God's plans. They spoke in the name of the Lord, yet they suffered greatly. Jeremiah was hunted by the men of his home town because they wanted to stop him from speaking in the name of the Lord. Ezekiel suffered painful bereavement as the setting in which he delivered his message. If Daniel had not suffered deportation, we would never have heard of him or benefited from his ministry. Hosea's marriage breakdown was in itself the Lord's word to and through him. And yet we consider that such people were blessed. Even though they suffered greatly, we know that God's blessing rested on them.

James points to Job as an example of faithful endurance. Job suffered tremendously. He lost his family, his health, his friends and his livelihood. He had to endure the unjust rebukes and wrong theology of his friends while he sat in torment and cursed the day he was born. But we know that God allowed all of these things so as to bring about his divine purposes. In the end, of course, the Lord was compassionate and merciful towards Job, and he restored his fortunes.

But things don't always turn out the way we would like. An illness is not healed. A child dies. A deceptive partner steals the business. What is the blessing then?

The word “compassion” refers to our inward parts, our guts. The ancients thought that our guts are the seat of our feelings. To be compassionate means to be deeply moved in the innermost parts of your being. The good Samaritan had compassion on the stranger lying on the side of the road. The father of the prodigal was moved to compassion by the sight of his son returning home. The blessing in the midst of suffering is to know and feel the Lord's compassion, to know the heart of the Father. This was the blessing for the prophets, and this was the blessing for Job. After Job had complained to God, God met him, and Job was forced to confess: “I had heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees Thee” (Job 42:5).

Jeremiah shook his fist at God and cursed the day of his birth, but in the end, he wrote in Lamentations:

**The LORD's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease,
For His compassions never fail.
They are new every morning;**

Great is Thy faithfulness. (Lam 3:22)

For the Lord will not reject forever,

For if He causes grief,

Then He will have compassion

According to His abundant lovingkindness. (Lam 3:31-32)

When we are suffering, we tend to ask, "Why me?" We shake our fist at God, expressing our anger and hurt. This is the place to start. It is good to be honest, to let our emotions show. God knows our hurt, our anger, our tears. He has hid them in his bottle. Then, in the midst of our grief and suffering we can begin to feel the Lord's compassion for us. We will have intimacy with him. A sweetness will fill our souls like nothing we have ever tasted. This is the blessing. This is why someone who has suffered deeply can say, "It was the most difficult year of my life, but it was the best year, because I saw God." The greater the suffering, the greater our capacity for God. We consider people who have endured to be blessed by God.

James has one more command here, a rather obscure word, in verse 12. It is somewhat difficult to fit this verse into the flow of the letter, and it isn't easy to understand, but I do think it is connected. Above all, James says, don't take an oath. Let your yes be yes and your no be no. What does this mean? It means that patience and endurance work themselves out in our speech. In the midst of a trial we can speak loosely and rashly. Jesus said much the same thing in the Sermon on the Mount. We are not to complain to one another, but neither are we to ascribe the name of the Lord to what may happen in the future or what we will do. At times we make promises to God in the midst of a trial. We say we will do certain things once the pressure is off. But when the trouble disappears, we forget about our oath. Another thing we are tempted to do is predict what God is doing through our trials. But if we do this, we end up misrepresenting the Lord; or we make misleading affirmations and promises to get our own way. We make pledges to other believers, but when we don't follow through, we have used the Lord's name falsely.

Our speech is very important. We must mean what we say. It is a matter of integrity and character. Our lips should speak truth, not lies. If we fail, the blessing of the Lord's compassion may be in jeopardy.

Suffering is a mystery, and we don't like mysteries. Suffering is painful, and we don't like pain. But we are called to be patient, to strengthen our hearts, and to endure in the midst of suffering. Let us allow God to hammer away and forge his character within us. We are called to wait for justice, because things will not be settled finally until the Lord comes. The greatest mystery is to know the Lord, to know his mercy and compassion. If we don't remain under the pressure, then we will not taste these wonderful blessings.

The boastful man takes control and plans his future arrogantly. The rich man stores up treasures on earth that decay and rot, leaving him with nothing that lasts. "Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial, for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love him" (James 1:12).

Wait for the LORD;

Be strong, and let your heart take courage;

Yes, wait for the LORD. (Ps 27:14)

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