

Be Patient: James 5:7-12
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Have you ever felt impatient? Maybe the more realistic question would be, Have you ever felt patient? So often we can be consumed with concerns and anxieties about the future. We feel like certain things are lacking in our lives, and want to get those things. Or we feel like there are certain things that we want to do or have to do, and there aren't enough hours in the day to accomplish everything. Feelings of impatience can consume us in some of the most mundane of activities. You find the shortest line at the grocery check-out, and then realize that eight people have been checked through in the line next to you while you're standing in the same place you were ten minutes ago. That will test your patience. Or you decide to take a different route home from work in order to avoid traffic, only to get stuck behind construction crews. These kinds of things test our patience on a regular basis.

But you may be encountering the need for patience in a much more significant way, too. Maybe you're single, and you desire to be married. Maybe you're married, and you desire to have kids. Maybe you're out of work, and you're anxiously seeking a new job. Maybe you're in school, and you are eager to complete your studies and begin your career. Maybe you have health problems, and you're waiting for the day when you will feel well.

On different levels and in various ways, we all face the issue of patience on a regular basis. And the passage that we're looking at this morning addresses this very issue. "Be patient," James says. As we near the end of James' letter, we recognize that he is returning to a theme that was also at the beginning of the letter. In chapter 1:2-4, and in verse 12, James wrote of steadfastness under trial. And now in 5:7-12 he comes to this point again. We are exhorted in verse 7 to be patient. In verse 8, again, be patient. Establish your hearts. In verses 10-11 James gives us examples of those who were patient and steadfast. This passage is about patience. This passage commands patience.

You might be asking yourself, "How do I obey this command?" How does one become patient? It's not a simple thing. You can't just snap your fingers and all of a sudden feel patient. It's not something we can produce in our hearts by a mere act of the will. It's interesting to observe that throughout this passage patience is connected with the coming of the Lord. Verse 7, be patient until the coming of the Lord. Verse 8, establish your hearts, *for* the coming of the Lord is at hand. And in the two warnings of this passage, James mentions the frightening aspect of

the Lord's coming, namely, judgment. In verse 9 we find a warning against grumbling, and the reason given is, "so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door." And in verse 12 we find a warning against oath-taking, and the reason given is, "so that you may not fall under condemnation (or judgment)." So we find here these exhortations concerning patience, and it's all in the context of Christ's return.

Nobody becomes patient merely by deciding to be patient. We become patient when, by God's grace, we receive a new heart and begin to view life in light of eternity. We have a forward-looking hope and expectation of Christ's return. And it's that future hope that gives us contentment and peace and patience in the present, even in the midst of hardship and trial.

I. The Call to Patience (verses 7-8)

Let's work our way through these verses, then, first looking at the call to patience that is found in verses 7-8. Verse 7 begins with the command, "be patient," and then there's the important conjunction, "therefore." And when we see that important logical connector, we have to ask what connection is being made in the context. And we look back to the passage we studied last week—the passage that rebuked the rich for their misuse of wealth and their oppression of the poor—and we can see that James is now turning his attention from the oppressors to those who are being oppressed. In light of the oppression of the wealthy landowners, and with the knowledge that judgment will surely come upon them, "be patient, therefore, brothers." The wicked rich who are oppressing you are only fattening their hearts in a day of slaughter (verse 5). Therefore, be patient. A day is soon coming when they will receive their judgment, and you will receive their reward.

The patience that James calls for is immediately and explicitly connected to the coming of the Lord. The word that is used in verse 7 and again in verse 8 is the Greek word, *parousia*. The word basically means, "presence," and it can speak of a person's arrival. And it's used in this way throughout the New Testament to refer to Christ's second coming. This will be a spectacular event. There's no way to talk about it without understating the magnitude and the magnificence of the *parousia*. When Christ comes, those who belong to Christ will be resurrected (1 Corinthians 15:23). When Christ comes, we will be gathered to Him (2 Thessalonians 2:1). When He comes, He will kill the man of lawlessness (2 Thessalonians 2:8). When He comes, the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and will be replaced by a new heavens and a new earth (2 Peter 3:12-13). Christ's return will be cataclysmic. It will be both fearful and wonderful. It will change everything and will affect everyone.

When is this Day coming? When will these things take place? We don't know, and we won't know until the Day is upon us. Matthew 24:36-39, "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. As were the days of Noah, so will be the *parousia* of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the *parousia* of the Son of Man." We know Christ is coming, but we don't know when. The point, therefore, is not to speculate when that Day is going to come. The point is to be always ready.

We might ask how James could say in verse 8 that the coming of the Lord is at hand, or to say in verse 9 that the Judge is standing at the door. It's been 2,000 years and Christ hasn't come yet! So how could it be said that it's near? And if another 2,000 years pass by before He comes, then how can we say now that it is near? Second Peter 3 provides as good an answer as we can find, although it may not fully satisfy our curiosity. Scoffers will say, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation" (v. 4). But Peter points out that "with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (v. 8). In other words, God's timing is not our timing. And then we're told why there has been an apparent delay in the Lord's coming. "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (v. 9). So it seems to us like it's taking a long time, but it's simply because God is being patient toward us and working out His plans to save all of His elect.

The point of going to Matthew 24 and 2 Peter 3 is to show that 1) we shouldn't speculate about the day and the hour, 2) we shouldn't be concerned by the fact that He hasn't come yet, and 3) we must not be like the scoffers who say He's not coming. He most certainly IS coming, even though we don't know when it will be. And we need to be prepared.

Are you prepared for the coming of the Lord? Do you look forward to Christ's return? Do you think about His return? Here's a question that we should each consider: How would my life be different if I woke up every morning reminding myself that the Lord is coming, and He's coming soon—indeed, He could come today? How would my priorities change? Would I use my time differently? Would I spend my money differently? The imminence of Christ's return—the nearness of His coming—along with the fact that we don't know how near it actually is, should

shape our lives in a very profound way. It should give us an eternal perspective on all of life.

The reminder of the Lord's coming serves as a great encouragement to us. It's an encouragement to us as we endure trials, because we understand that the trial is not going to last forever. It will pass, and someday Jesus will return and set everything right. And we will go to a place where there is no death or mourning or crying or pain (Revelation 21:4). That was the hope given to these saints who were suffering under the oppression of wealthy landowners. And it is also our hope when we meet trials of various kinds (James 1:2). We know that God is refining us and sanctifying us and working all things for our good (Romans 8:28), and that one day He will glorify us. His coming is near.

Think about how we're motivated by the various finish lines of life. Maybe your work is difficult and demanding, but you find encouragement and motivation when you look at the clock and see that the work day is almost over. Or you're a mother of young children and you see that it's almost nap-time or bedtime, and you rejoice. Or you've been laboring on some project, and your productivity increases as you realize that the project is almost complete. You run in a race, and you're completely exhausted but then you see the finish line ahead in the distance and you press on to the end. That's how this verse ought to impact us. The end is near. Keep going. Don't give up. Don't quit now. Be patient in your suffering and trials. Press on. Finish strong.

"Establish your hearts" is the other way James states it in verse 8. The verb is the same one that's used of Jesus in Luke 9:51 where it says that "he set his face to go to Jerusalem." And He knew, and we know, what was going to happen to Him in Jerusalem. He was going there to die. But He set His face toward Jerusalem. He determined to suffer for us. And do know how He did it? It was "for the joy that was set before him" that He "endured the cross" (Hebrews 12:2). He could face that horrible pain and agony because He was looking to the joy on the other side of it. Similarly, we can endure the trials and pains of this life, by looking to the joy that will be ours at the coming of Christ.

James uses a farming illustration in verse 7 to show what this patience looks like. It's like the patience of a farmer who "waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains." The early rains came in the fall and were important during the time when the seeds were planted. And then the late rains came in the spring and were important before harvest. The farmer has to wait for these rains and wait for the seed to grow. This reminds us of the process in 1:2-4. The trials produce steadfastness and the steadfastness produces spiritual maturity. As we compare ourselves to the

farmer, we may sometimes feel like the early and the late rains are more like the early and the late storms and hurricanes and tornadoes. But we have to trust that whatever God brings into our lives is for our good and will ultimately produce very precious fruit.

I love it that it doesn't just say the farmer waits for the fruit of the earth, but it says, "the farmer waits for the *precious* fruit of the earth." This is really what gets at the nature of our waiting. Our waiting is worth it, because we're waiting for something that is precious beyond words. The coming of the Lord and our eternal fellowship with him will be such a precious reward for our patience.

II. Examples of Suffering and Patience (verses 10-11)

Next, let's skip to verses 10-11 and look at some examples of suffering and patience, and then we'll look at verses 9 and 12 together under the heading, "patient speech." But first, examples of suffering and patience in verses 10-11. Verse 10 cites "the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord." These are individuals who suffered much and endured. They remained faithful to the Lord in the midst of severe trials and persecution. James doesn't name any of them, but we think of Elijah fleeing for his life from Jezebel (1 Kings 19). We think of Jeremiah in the mud at the bottom of a cistern (Jeremiah 38:6). We think of Isaiah, who was sawn in two, as tradition has it (see Hebrews 11:37). These men spoke in the name of the Lord, and for that they were persecuted. They suffered and remained steadfast, and James points to them as examples of suffering and patience. He's doing the same thing that his brother, Jesus, did in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:11-12 Jesus said, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Jesus pointed to the prophets who were persecuted, and then He, the ultimate Prophet, made the ultimate sacrifice. He is our ultimate example of suffering and patience.

Listen also to the words of Stephen in Acts 7, who pointed back to the prophets were persecuted and killed, just before he, himself, was martyred. "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it" (Acts 6:51-53). And then they took Stephen outside of the city and stoned him.

So as we think about suffering and patience, we must remember the examples of those who have gone before us—those who spoke in the name of the Lord and endured much persecution because of it. And we should be inspired and encouraged by their example.

In verse 11 James writes that “we consider those blessed who remained steadfast,” and then he mentions the “steadfastness” of Job. This is the only place that Job is mentioned in the New Testament, and he is presented as an example of steadfastness. These words translated “those who remained steadfast” and “steadfastness” are the same words that are used in James 1, in verses 3-4 and 12. It’s different than the word for “patience,” but the two are closely related in this passage in James 5. And we see these characteristics in Job’s life, not perfectly, but in the midst of extraordinary trials. After Job lost his possessions and his children, it says in Job 1:20-22, “Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.’ In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.” And then when Job, himself, was afflicted and his wife even discouraged him and said, “Curse God and die,” Job responded, “‘Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?’ In all this Job did not sin with his lips.” (Job 2:10). That is the attitude of steadfastness. That is the attitude of someone who trusts in the sovereignty and goodness of God. Notice in James 5:11 that the sentence moves quickly past Job to focus on the Lord—“and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.” We are to emulate the steadfastness of the prophets and of Job, but the only way we can do that is by seeing the amazing purposes of our compassionate and merciful God.

Do you feel like Job today? Do you feel like the world is crashing down all around you? Do you feel like your life is falling apart? Look past your difficult circumstances to the purposes of the Lord. I love the words of William Cowper in the hymn, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way.” “Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust him for his grace; behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face.” You may interpret the difficult circumstances of your life as God frowning upon you, but if you belong to Him then every trial you face is part of God’s good plan for you. It’s not His frown that you are facing, but His smile. Romans 8:28, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”

That's our comfort in the midst of trials. That's our motivation and hope as we seek to persevere in the fight of faith. Be patient! Be steadfast! God has a purpose in all of these hardships, and His purpose is compassionate and merciful. He is sanctifying us! He is conforming us to the image of Jesus Christ!

I want to encourage you, friends, with the truth that our Lord is compassionate and merciful. You may be discouraged because of your sin. You may feel defeated and depressed. You may feel like throwing in the towel. Maybe the trials of life seem pointless, and you don't see any hope for the future. Please, friend, look to Jesus Christ. He is compassionate. He is merciful. He died in our place to pay the penalty for our sin. He clothes us in His own righteousness. In Him our sins are forgotten, and we are clean and pure in the eyes of God. So don't dwell on the failures and frustrations of your own life, but look away from yourself and fix your eyes on Jesus. He will forgive your sin, and He will use all of the hardships in your life to bring you closer and closer to Himself.

III. Patient Speech (verse 9, 12)

We've seen the call to patience in verses 7-8. We've seen examples of suffering and patience in verses 10-11. Finally, let's look at patient speech in verses 9 and 12. James has written about patience in trials earlier in the letter, and he has also written much about the tongue earlier in this letter. Chapter 3 dealt with taming the tongue, and in 4:11 we're told, "Do not speak evil against one another." And here, in the context of patience, we're told again, "Do not grumble against one another, brothers." Impatience very often becomes evident in our speech. Our impatient hearts produce impatient words. We're under the pressure of some kind of trial, and we're feeling impatient and frustrated, and we take it out on others. We blame others, and grumble against them. Based on what we know about the purpose of the Lord, and the Lord's compassion and mercy even in ordaining the trials that we face—based on what we know about God's sovereignty in all of this—when we grumble against others we are ultimately grumbling against God. We refuse to humble ourselves before God and recognize how He's working on us, and instead we gripe and complain and grumble.

James refers again, at this point, to the coming of Christ. Don't grumble. Why? "so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door." This is the other aspect of the *parousia* that we need to be aware of. The Lord is coming back to judge. Therefore, the immanence of His return is not only a hopeful encouragement to be patient and to persevere under trial, but it is also a very serious warning to fight sin and pursue

holiness. The Bible gives us both promises and warnings, and here we find both the promise and the warning of Christ's return.

One manifestation of impatience is grumbling against others. Another manifestation of impatience is rash oaths, which James warns against in verse 12. "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." I don't think James has in mind, here, the kind of oath a person may take in court. What he's speaking to is the practice in his day of making oaths that sounded sincere but were really just a cover-up for a lack of integrity. James is really just repeating what Jesus said in Matthew 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.' But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil." And in Matthew 23 Jesus condemns the scribes and Pharisees for their ridiculous stipulations about which oaths were binding and which were not binding. They were saying, "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" (verse 16). And, "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" (verse 18). You can see that a very odd system had developed of making these oaths. They would be worded in such a way that left some wiggle room for a person to back out of the obligation. Jesus, and James, say, have nothing to do with this kind of double-talk. Don't make rash promises. Don't promise something that you can't follow through on. Don't speak half-truths. Be a person of integrity, so that your "yes" means yes, and your "no" means no.

Peter provides us with a painful example of swearing falsely and rashly. He had already denied Jesus twice, and a third person said, "'Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you.' Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, 'I do not know the man.' And immediately the rooster crowed" (Matthew 26:73-74). In this case it's not just an exaggeration or a half-truth, but a flat out lie. But it shows us how oaths were used.

Think about your own speech. Think about the things you say when you're under stress. Think about the promises you might be tempted to make, even though you know that it's unlikely that you'll follow through. Think about the half-truths, or flat out lies, that you're tempted to speak in order to get yourself out of a bind.

When we are in the midst of a trial, when we're under pressure and not patiently trusting in the Lord, our speech will be hasty and rash. But as God changes us, and as we look to His return, and His judgment, which James mentions again in this verse, our patience will be evident in our speech. We will grumble less, and we will also be more truthful and dependable in the things we say and the commitments we make.

How does one become patient? Not by a mere act of the will. We become patient when God changes us from the inside out and gives us eyes to see things in light of eternity—so that we're motivated by the hope of Christ's return and we also heed the warnings of the coming judgment.

May God make us patient people—patient in the grocery line, in the traffic jam, in sickness, in loss, in hardship, in disappointment. May we look to the immanent coming of Christ and be motivated to persevere.