

“Struggling with Patience” – James 5:7-12
July 12, 2020 – Outdoor Morning Services
Faith Presbyterian Church, Tacoma, WA
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James 5:7-12

Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. 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. 8 You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. 9 Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. 10 As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. 11 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. 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.

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Let’s pray.

On April 27, 2011, we hid in the basement of my parents’ home in Flintstone, GA. An EF4 tornado with max winds of 190 mph hit the neighborhood we were living in. By God’s grace my parent’s home was completely spared, but the homes around us were destroyed, with some vehicles having been thrown up to 50 yards.

One news source reported that an “old, block foundation home actually exploded when the tornado hit, lifting and sweeping the entire thing several hundred yards.”¹ In those few moments, people lost their loved ones, their livelihood and their homes.

In the interviews following that event, you could see the despair in people’s eyes, and you could hear it in their voices. They didn’t know what to do. They were at a loss.

In the story of Job, which James references here, we read of the account of Satan tormenting Job. He began by taking the life of his beloved children, his livelihood, his homes, and then finally Job’s personal health. Satan used every technique at his disposal to provoke Job to curse God and turn to despair.

And despite Job’s brokenness, we learn that Job was commended, for he remained steadfast in his faith in the midst of his suffering, and he blessed the Lord. **And like Job, in this passage James teaches us the importance of remaining steadfast in our suffering.**

¹ <https://wdef.com/2016/04/27/remembering-april-27-minute-minute-2/>

To begin, we should note that the passage we studied last week is an important backdrop for what James writes here. James speaks to the brethren fully acknowledging that the believers were undergoing difficult times.

He understood that there was injustice in the world and that there were those who would live on this earth in luxury and in self-indulgence, fattening their hearts at the expense of their brethren.

Suffering is part of life

James did not avoid the difficult subject and addressed sin and suffering head on. He validated their suffering and rebuked their oppressors.

While it can be tempting to think that Christians should not talk about our suffering, or that we should act as if everything in our lives is always fine, we should realize that that is not how the Bible talks about the reality of sin and suffering.

Paul Tripp explains it this way,

“The Bible never denies reality.....The Bible never tricks you into thinking that things are better than they are. The Bible is straightforward and honest but not void of hope. While it is very candid about the hardships of life in this broken world, the Bible is also gloriously hopeful. The honesty does not crush the hope, but neither does the hope negate the honesty.” (Paul David Tripp, *New Morning Mercies*, 7/18).

Ignoring Suffering won't help

Our pain and our suffering are real and suppressing it or acting like it isn't there isn't going to change reality, in the same way that stuffing things under the bed or in the closet isn't a good solution to a messy room. The mess still exists, you've just disguised the reality of the situation.

And God knows we are suffering, and I see this passage as a sort of love note to his children. It is like he is softly reminding us that he knows of our struggles and our pain, and he has not forgotten it.

We know this because these verses are spoken to people who have endured great hardship: the brokenhearted, the weak, the sick, the abused and the lonely.

And through his servant James, God is gently reminding us today ***that he has not forgotten our suffering***. He tells us to hold on, to endure the pain and searing loss, and to wait on him.

And the reason for this **word of hope** is because God knows the effect of suffering on his people. He knows that suffering can cause despair.

As we know, intense suffering often causes people to react poorly. In v.9 of our text, we see that the Christians were 1) grumbling about their situation. Then we see that James is 2) calling them to be patient. Adding these two together, we can gather that they were losing

their patience (despairing) and were starting to grow angry and cynical with others and with God.

James calls them to guard against that. And it is not hard for us to imagine that we too need to guard our hearts from the same. It is far too easy to lose patience and fall into despair, and grow hardened or cynical in our frustration and anger.

Despair

Let's consider our tendency to despair first.

When I was 18, I remember looking for a job. I went from place to place, handing out my pretty much empty resume and getting the "don't call us, we'll call you" response over and over again. And if you have ever been on a job search like that, it can be pretty discouraging. The search becomes harder and harder, and it is easy to lose hope that you will ever be offered a job. I remember feeling despair very early in that search.

And if we think back to our context, James wrote to Christians who were like likely feeling the despair a refugee might feel. They were also looking for work, and likely had no connections, no fallback plan, no reputation, no money to their name – and they were under heavy persecution. On top of all that, it was likely very hard for them to find jobs. They were under immense pressure to provide for their families so they could eat and have a place to live.

Imagine what it would be like to take your family into a new city, going from place to place, fearing for your lives, and what it would feel like to try to keep them safe in a city and be rejected over and over again. Imagine the despair and brokenness.

And while many of us might not know what they felt like, we have probably all gone through some level of intense suffering. We know what it feels like to lose hope and break down emotionally, spiritually and sometimes even physically.

It is not difficult to imagine that the family who has a wayward or rebellious child has felt this pain. They have poured everything they can into him/her and have prayed and prayed and prayed. They have read books, they have listened to sermons, sought counsel, and there is no change. We could see how they would be despairing.

Then of course there are the myriad of health issues that plague many of us. That sort of suffering can cause extreme despair as well. Endless appointments, waiting rooms, piles of bills, more tests, more scans, more samples. The pharmacies, the insurance, the protocols, the waiting to be attended to, the waiting to be discharged, and of course the discouraging news that things are not getting better, or additional things are going badly. You go in for one thing, and you come out with more problems than you went in with!

And what about relationships? I remember asking one of my recently married friends how he was liking marriage. He paused and sighed and said, "It is sanctifying." It was a sad response, especially so early in marriage, but the truth is that marriage can be one of the

most beautiful and most challenging of all relationships. Whenever you put two fallen people together 24/7/365, you are bound to come across some hardships. Throw in extended family, children and money and you have a perfect storm!

These things, and many more, can present such high stress moments of anguish and pain that sometimes we give into despair. We lose patience and we want to throw in the towel.

Walls

Other times, instead of despairing, we take the seemingly stronger approach. We put walls up – we grow hard-hearted and protective of ourselves and our loved ones. We judge those around us and grumble about everything that is happening.

For example, we can think of people who have been turned off by an experience at the church. They have a legitimately bad experience and decide that all churches, and all Christians everywhere, are the same. Their walls go up, and they decide not to let the church back in. They decide that Christianity is not for them based on their bad experience with a certain group of Christians.

And though we feel that that response seems irrational, we do a similar thing in our own lives, but in other areas.

We become jaded towards people. If we've taken risks and been burned by one or two people, in our pain and suffering we decide never to take risks on people again.

Perhaps this is why our hospitality suffers sometimes. We have had bad experiences, so we decide to close up our homes, our hearts, our relationships, and decide to never be vulnerable again.

Think of the Christians James was writing to – how they had been mistreated by other Christians, and how easy it would be for them to grow bitter and jaded toward them, to become hardened and judge them and complain about them.

It is not hard to imagine. It is so easy to become cynical when you suffer. Suffering produces different responses, and one of those responses is hardness of heart. Which easily translates into dismissing others, grumbling, cursing, and growing impatient with God and with man.

And as our suffering in life continues, as it most certainly will in different ways and at different times, our temptations and struggles will only grow more difficult.

We will be tested in ways we never anticipated and be stretched in ways we hoped we'd never be stretched. As our trials and suffering continue to increase, will we continue to despair and grow jaded?

What is the heart issue, if not the fact that we sometimes feel God is absent??

And it seems like James knew that that was what the Christians were feeling right then.

In fact, they were probably feeling like that because they felt utterly alone. They didn't feel God's presence or blessing, and they were likely starting to question if they had made the right choice by signing up to be a Christian in the first place. So far, they only seemed to be doing worse and worse.

And James anticipated that the believers were struggling, and that they needed some reassurance that God was with them.

God had not forgotten: They were not alone in their suffering

And to encourage his readers, James calls them to remember the prophets. (V.10)

Now, if we look back specifically to the book of Daniel, we can see what James means. We all know of the struggles of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, trying to maintain hope while under the rule of their conquerors, the mighty Babylon.

In this book we learn about how Daniel was thrown into a lion's den and we learn how his three friends were thrown into a fiery furnace. All in all, the book doesn't seem to demonstrate that God is with his people. They've been overtaken by their enemies and they undergo highly distressing situations, to say the least.

Anyone during their time would have assumed that God had forgotten them. But as you read through the book, you see that God had not forgotten them. Dr. Kelly Kopic writes on this subject, saying:

"As Daniel's friends Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego discovered, God's faithfulness does not necessarily mean we will not face the flames, but it does mean that *he* will be *with* his people in the midst of the flames." (Kelly Kopic, *Embodied Hope*, 161).

This is easy to forget. As we have seen up to this point, we sometimes identify suffering with God's absence. We feel abandoned, so we despair. We feel forgotten, so we grow hard-hearted toward God.

But if anyone had a reason to be frustrated and feel abandoned by God, it was Daniel and his friends. They were under foreign rule; they were being persecuted. But they knew that God was with them.

They trusted God in the good and the bad.

And of course, James mentioned Job as well. He reminds us that Job remained steadfast even in the midst of the total destruction of his entire life.

You see, that is the problem with not finishing a story. You only get to see part of the puzzle. See, if you only read the beginning of Job and the beginning of Daniel, and don't see what happens in the end, you think God has forgotten them and abandoned them.

But the reality is that God was with them the whole time. James tells the Christians to look at "the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord," because all of God's prophets suffered in his name. They were his true prophets, his chosen vessels, and they suffered.

Even John the Baptist suffered a horrendous death.

Would we think that all these people were abandoned by God? That he left them to die and suffer because he had forgotten them? No, of course not!

These men were God's chosen vessels. They were sacred, they were his mouthpiece, and even so, God permitted them all to endure the most heinous deaths, and the most tragic suffering on this earth.

And not only that, but Jesus, God's only begotten Son, suffered upon this earth.

We need to expand our view of suffering. Do we suffer when we sin? Yes. Are there consequences when we sin? Yes, of course.

But suffering should not always be equated with sin or the consequences of our sins.

In order to understand James, we need to know what books he read and what sermons he listened to. And if you want to really know James, you have to know this: James LOVED the Sermon on the Mount.

It's like he just had it on repeat. If there had been email and Facebook in his day, he would have shared this sermon to all of his contacts and would have posted it on every page. He loved this sermon and he loved his brother Jesus.

In fact, he loved it so much that he wrote his whole book around it. It is shocking really how much he takes from it!

But back to the topic at hand. James here is not just saying to the Christians of his day, "Hey guys, if you want a good example of patience, take a look at the prophets." Nope! He is quoting Jesus in Matthew 5:10-11!

He is saying, "Be patient because of what Jesus said." Listen to what he says in Matthew 5:

Matt. 5:10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, **for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**

James is telling the Christians under persecution that not only are they not forgotten by God, but that they should rejoice, because they are following in the same footsteps as all the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord!

In other words, they are doing the right thing. They are on the right path; they are following in the footsteps of those great prophets who went before them.

Of course, they are being persecuted and enduring hardship and suffering. They are children of God and the devil was trying to do everything in his power to make them despair and turn against the Lord.

Instead of despairing in their suffering, they should have been rejoicing, as the apostles did when “they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.” (Acts 5:41).

Brothers and sisters, you might think, “Well these prophets and these dispersed Christians were the real deal. They were prophets who were preaching God’s word, or they were Christians who were running for their lives because of their beliefs or imprisoned because they were preaching Jesus in public.

“I’m not suffering for any of those things. I’m just suffering because I’m old, or because I am sick, or because of personal stuff. I’m suffering because of many other petty reasons.

“This doesn’t exactly apply to me.”

But that is not correct. Jesus doesn’t just bless those who are persecuted as prophets, or apostles. He doesn’t just bless your suffering if you happen to be suffering in the act of doing ministry.

You are counted blessed and righteous if you are suffering now! Look at Job! Job wasn’t zipping through the Amazon jungles with arrows flying past his ears. He wasn’t flying planes full of Bibles into remote villages. He wasn’t witnessing in the park squares.

He was living his life in obedience to God and had kids that worried him to death because they loved to party. It is the equivalent of your kids wanting to watch TV and play games all day.

Job wasn’t extra special, and we will see in our next section that neither was Elijah. James says, “Elijah was a man with a nature like ours.”

The fact is, the Sermon on the Mount is an amazing sermon because it is all about our practical living. It is about being a Christian and suffering as a Christian. It means loving your enemies, it means fighting temptation, it means patiently and prayerfully enduring a difficult marriage, it means not being anxious, or laying up treasure on earth. It is an extremely practical and down-to-earth sermon.

And Jesus is the one preaching it, and he is the one saying blessed are those! Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Brothers and sisters, honoring God in your sickness, honoring God in your family struggles, honoring God in your difficult marriage, honoring God in your financial or work situation, all of these things and more are ways in which we suffer in this world, to walk in the narrow gate.

Jesus toward the end of his sermon says that the wide gate is the easy way. But it is the way that leads to destruction, and those that enter it are many. So, he says, enter by the narrow gate... "for the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few." (Matthew 7:13-14).

After talking about all the practical aspects of being a follower of Jesus, he ends with "the narrow gate is hard."

You see, remaining steadfast is a hard task. Guarding your heart against despair and cynicism is so, so difficult. But that is what we are called to. To endure in hardship. To pursue patience and trust in him.

Strengthen your Hearts

So, with this in mind, James calls us to strengthen our hearts, or establish our hearts (v. 8).

God knows that we will be tempted to despair. He knows that we will be tempted to grow restless on this earth, when others prosper at our expense, and disregard His word.

We look around and we see others living lives contrary to God's word. We see people disregarding his word and living worldly lifestyles. We see people who date non-Christians, who smudge the numbers on their finances, who cut corners and live in blatant disobedience, and whose lives seem better than ours.

It is easy to want to give in, to go the way of the wide and easy path. But James says, "Don't give in! Don't despair. Have patience in your suffering. Be steadfast. Don't give into temptation. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness."

"Strengthen your hearts, because the coming of the Lord is at hand." Three times James tells us this. The coming of the Lord is at hand. He is standing at the door, as if to say, he is about to open it!

Be ready, don't give into temptation, because the Lord is coming!

Growing up my mom broke many a wooden spoon on our rear ends. I admit, sometimes we would laugh and that would not help out our situation. She would say, "Just wait until your father comes home." Then we knew we were in trouble.

But this is the opposite scenario. Here James isn't telling his readers, "Just wait until Jesus comes." He is saying, "Wait until Jesus comes!"

He is saying, "Don't despair, and don't give up, because the same Jesus who was with Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and with Job and all the prophets before, is with you. "

If you have trusted in Jesus as your Savior, you know that at his coming, all our suffering and all our pain will be gone forever!

All our struggles here on this earth – fighting temptation, fighting impatience, fighting resentment – will be rewarded.

The patient endurance of loving your enemies, and loving those who have sinned against you in grievous ways, will be rewarded. The way you did not resist the one who was evil to you, and offered the right cheek, and the way you loved others as you loved yourself will be rewarded.

And we know this not because we did all these things well. No! We need to look back to the example of the good tree and good fruit. Jesus didn't say that good fruit makes a tree healthy. He says we know that people are true believers because out of the healthy tree comes good fruit. In other words, our fruit doesn't make us a healthy tree; we are already a healthy tree in Jesus.

The point of the good fruit is that it shows the observing world around us that we are in fact saved. It isn't the fruit that saves us; it is because of the fact that we are saved in Jesus that we have good fruit.

This is important because it makes Jesus' return all the sweeter. You see, the fact that Jesus is the one who makes us righteous, and Jesus who makes us patient, makes him opening the door to our heavenly home all the sweeter – because he has reconciled us with the Father; and by the Holy Spirit he is making us whole and perfect through suffering; and in his Second Coming, he is taking us home to complete the job of complete glorification; and he will make us whole as the author and perfecter of our faith, once and for all. No more suffering, no more pain, no more tears.

This is our greatest hope and encouragement: to know that Jesus will call us home, and that in his compassion and mercy, we can confidently run through that door, because as his beloved children, ours is the kingdom of heaven.

In Conclusion

The Bible does not ignore the hardship in our lives. God knows of our suffering and it is that suffering which reminds us that we are his. He knows of our despair and our temptation to cynicism, and he calls us to guard ourselves from it, and instead to establish and cast our eyes upon Jesus, and to know that he is coming again very soon. Therefore, let

us rejoice and be glad, and say in our hearts and with our lips, "Come Lord Jesus, Come."
Amen.