

# James 5:7-20

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Date: 24 March 2024

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[ 0 : 00 ] Please turn back in your Bibles to James chapter 5, and we'll try and bring things into land in this series.

I'm glad to say that they didn't hold to that. My mom was too tender-hearted to hold to that. I discovered that good things happen to naughty boys as well.

But she used to say it all the time, good things happen to good boys. The other one which she was much more consistent in following through on was, patience is a virtue.

Now that's widely used. It's a maxim, it's a truism that we hear, but it was something that was held to rigidly in my house when we were growing up.

My mom's preferred form of discipline was grounding, also known as house arrest. And one year, I believe it was 1985, it would have been easier to record that sanction in months rather than in days or weeks for me.

[ 1 : 26 ] But having to wait and wait and wait didn't feel like a virtue. My experience when I was younger did, of course, make lockdown a lot easier, but that's a different story.

But having to learn patience didn't feel like a virtue when I was a boy, and it still doesn't feel that way today. None of us like to wait. And it's even harder today than it was in the 1980s because so much of life is instant.

From Amazon, see you in an hour, to Uber, and whatever you like, in between, we live in a time of instant everything. So having to wait for something is just alien to us.

It feels unnatural. And if you're being asked to wait in a hard situation, it's not just that it feels unnatural. Sometimes it can feel unbearable. Which is why our instincts take us in other directions. We try and change our circumstances. We try and do things. We get about being busy in order to try and change the situation. James has showed us all the way through this letter that this is the predicament of these Christians.

[ 2 : 37 ] Their lives have been made very difficult because of the kind of persecution and depression that we were just praying about a moment or two ago. They have been scattered, and they are experiencing loss and pain and separation and difficulty.

And it's difficult. But they haven't responded well. They haven't responded in the way that they should. We've seen that in their words and in their actions, they have tried to fight fire with fire. They've tried to take their persecutors on in the way that their persecutors have acted. They have tried to behave towards those who have made their life difficult by being difficult back to them. And James, through the letter, has been calling them back to obedience. That's what we've seen week by week. And we saw last week that one of the motivations for their obedience, for coming back to submit their lives under God in His world, is that God is going to deal with their oppressors. He sees what these Christians are experiencing, and He sees what those who are oppressing them are doing to His children. And He will act to judge. We saw that last week.

[ 3 : 52 ] In fact, James raises this point about judgment again. In our passage this morning in verses 8 and 9, God's judgment is coming. And His people need to settle it in their hearts that they will be on the right side of that event.

That they won't make decisions now that will lead them to be on the wrong side of that judgment when it comes. Do you see verses 8 and 9? The coming of the Lord Jesus is at hand.

The Lord Jesus is coming back to judge the living and the dead. We confessed it in our creed this morning. And James is saying, He's at hand. He's not in the taxi.

He's not coming down the street. He's at the door, verse 9. And the only thing that remains is for Him to open that door and come in. And so James exhorts this church to wait on the Lord and to wait on Him to bring His purposes to pass in His time on His terms.

And as he closes out the letter, he tells them that this will require patience. From our perspective, as James teases out what this looks like, we are given the mandate for the church in the negative world.

[ 5 : 04 ] In our context where we are struggling to live faithfully as Christians because being Christian, naming the name of Christ is costly for us. He says, this is what it looks like.

This is what is required. The church in the negative world must be marked by, number one, patient endurance. Patient endurance, verses 7 to 12.

Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. Verse 8, you also be patient. James mentions patience or waiting five times. And he fleshes out what that patience will look like by giving us three examples.

Did you notice them? The first is there in verse 7. It's the farmer. We're to look to the farmer. What's going on here? We're waiting while we're not in control. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, verse 7, being patient about it until it receives the early and the late rains.

As a family, a while ago, we enjoyed sitting down together and watching Clarkson's farm, as lots of people have done. Now, two things, well, there were lots of things, but two things in particular struck me about that series.

[ 6 : 11 ] The first is how hard the work of farming actually is. Even with all of the machinery that Amazon provided, a Lamborghini tractor, for goodness sake.

It's hard work. It is hard graft. But as well as that, you couldn't miss just how much of the success of the farmer's work that is actually out of his hands.

The crop farmer hopes for the early rain to be able to plant, but he can't make the early rain fall. And when he's done that, when he's planted it, there is nothing else he can do but wait.

Yeah, he can put some fertilizer on. He can put a bit of water on. He can do various bits of tending here and there. He can keep an eye on things, pick the weeds and that sort of stuff. But whatever comes up out of the ground is actually out of his control.

He just has to wait and see what comes. He has to wait and see what God brings out of the ground. And this is what God calls his church to do in every era.

[ 7 : 16 ] To hand over control of our lives and to wait on him. And when life is hard, that is also what we are to do with our pain. We are to plant our pain in the ground of his promises and wait and see what he does with it.

Even though we can't see what he's doing, even though we can't do anything to change the situation, we are to wait on the Lord and see what comes up.

We are to weep patiently. Last week we were told, or sorry, earlier in the letter we've been told that we are to humble ourselves before the Lord.

In many ways this is where humility before the Lord really bites for us. Because when life is hard, we get angry with him. We, verse 9, grumble against him and against one another.

We've seen that again and again in the letter. Because we're not in control and we're not able to change the situation. We can't do anything about where we're stuck. And we don't know what he's doing beneath the surface.

[ 8 : 22 ] Like the farmer doesn't know what's really going on under there. We don't know what God is doing beneath the surface of this whole situation. And we don't know what fruit he plans to bring out of it all.

James says, like the farmer, we need to wait while we're not in control. Second example is the prophets, verse 10.

It points us in that direction. And here it is trusting when obedience is unpopular. As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

James doesn't specify which prophets he had in mind. But the Old Testament prophets suffered persecution and rejection as they proclaimed God's Word and called God's people to obedience and were really unpopular for it.

And yet they remained steadfast. And now we call them blessed. Now, again, mentioning the prophets here is designed to draw a line between James' hearers to the faithful of the past in such a way as to assure them that they really belong to God.

[ 9 : 37 ] You remember their oppressors are the ones who are saying, come back to the true way of God. Come back to the Judaism that is the established religion, the true way of God's blessing.

And it would have been easy for this scattered and weak and persecuted group to think, have we got this right? These are amongst the very first disciples of the Lord Jesus.

And they look around and they're saying, maybe you should, do you think that we're on the right track here? Look at this temple and how impressive it is. Look at all that's going on in the structures that these guys are talking about here and are part of.

And what James is doing is subverting the message of the Jewish religious oppressors. And he's assuring his hearers that those who follow Jesus are the faithful remnant of Israel.

Even though to the naked eye it's the oppressors with all of their power and wealth who look like they have the blessing. James is saying, remember the prophets. And remember how they trusted God and they kept going in God's Word even when their obedience was unpopular.

[10:46] And the third example, verse 11. You've heard the steadfastness of Job and you've seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

Here he says, look at Job. Yes, go to the farmer, go to the prophets, but look at Job. Enduring, keeping on when life hurts. You know the story of Job.

He lost his wife, he lost his children, he lost his health, he lost his wealth. The man lost everything he had in a physical and a material sense, but he remained steadfast.

Yes, he complained to God. He cursed the day that he was born, Job chapter 3. He believed God was absent in his suffering. Verse chapter 23 of the book of Job.

But his faith was never ultimately snuffed out. In the midst of his incredible personal suffering, he hung on to God. Job is a surprising name to find here, I think, given how much he wrestled and thrashed in his situation.

[11:55] Is Job really an example of patient suffering? Is he really an example of someone who endured faithfully? But we only ask that question if we think that being patient, waiting on the Lord, is a stoic thing.

Or an English stiff upper lip thing, where there's no emotion. We just suck it up and get on with things and everything's very calm. That's not what waiting patiently looks like biblically.

Waiting on the Lord in the midst of your trials doesn't mean that there aren't tears. There isn't wrestling and anger and frustration. The book of Psalms is an inspired example of an intense passion and confusion and pleading and wrestling.

And we're given that book because it is through this journey that God grows us up to maturity. Remember, that's what our trials are aimed at.

That's where this journey with James the Apostle started out. Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds. Why on earth would you do that? You do it because of what God is doing under the surface.

[13:03] Because of what God is growing under there. In terms of growing our character. Giving us steadfastness. Giving us courage. Giving us maturity as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Job is an example of patient endurance for us to follow, James says. But in mentioning Job and explaining what's going on there, the way that he does in verse 11, James is reminding us of what God is doing in our suffering.

See that? Consider the example of Job. You've seen the purpose of the Lord. How the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

What is going on in all of that is that God is revealing to us His compassion and mercy in a deeper way. Do you see that? The promise of the example of Job is that when we meet our trials with patient endurance, suffering is not the end of the story.

Suffering is not all there is. And these verses assure us that in the end, God transforms our trials to magnify His grace and mercy.

[14:16] That was the promise that sustained Joseph in an Egyptian prison cell. It was that promise that sustained David when he was on the run from Saul.

It was that promise that sustained the Lord Jesus as he went to his death. He knew that Sunday would follow Friday. And it is ultimately the victory of the Lord Jesus that motivates us to patiently endure.

One author puts it well when he says this. Quote, End quote.

Maybe your life is very, very painful. And it feels like God is taking one thing after another from you. Or He's adding another burden.

And it feels like God is taking one thing. None of what you're enduring is without purpose. And one day it will be renewed and will be made beautiful by God.

[16:14] And you'll see on that day His compassion and His mercy in new and deep ways.

So be patient. Keep going. Don't swear allegiance to any other way of life. Don't take an oath to another God, whatever that might be.

Keep going. Keep going. Patient endurance. Trust God to accomplish His work in His time. Keep going.

And of course, one of the ways that we express this commitment, express our patience, is through what James then turns to next.

Prayer. Here's the second quality that should mark the church that is faithful in difficult times. Point number two, prayerful community.

[17:10] Point one, patient endurance. Point two, prayerful community. Thirteen to twenty. Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church and let them pray over him. The emphasis on prayer in this section is obviously very clear. It is, of course, the one thing we can always do, however difficult our circumstances may be.

When things are hard, we cry out to God. But it's also the case when things are good, we give Him praise for the things that are going well. Prayer is how we express the fact that God is at the center of our lives.

But I think there's something specific going on here with the person who is sick in verse 14. Now, in one sense, what James is describing here is the normal way that things should work with a case of particularly persistent or particularly serious illness.

They call for the elders of the church to pray. Now, what they do when they call the elders in this way is they're asking for the church's prayers. The prayers of the church community because the elders represent the whole church.

[18:19] And when the elders come, there's a sense in which they bring the church with them. And they anoint the sick person with oil in the name of the Lord. Oil is used in a variety of different ways in the Bible.

But here it is applied in a symbolic way, I think, to acknowledge that the sick person needs the ministry of the Holy Spirit for their healing. 1 Samuel 16, verse 13.

Oil there symbolizes the descent of the Spirit. So what's happening with the oil? Why does it get mentioned here? The oil anoints the sick person, sets them apart for the prayers of the church, and represents visibly the invisible work of the Spirit in a way that can be seen and can be felt.

This is James' recommendation for regular physical sickness. But I do think that there's more to say here. So look again, verse 14. I want to suggest that the person in question here is sick for a specific reason.

And that their restoration is about more than physical healing. Do you see the word play? So look at verse 15. We're told the prayer of faith will save, not heal, the one who is sick.

[19:49] Verse 15. Forgiveness is mentioned. Verse 16. Confession and healing, you see, they're linked. And also, the words translated, and if, at the start of the second half of verse 15, and if he has committed sins, that can also be translated, even though.

Which would mean the verse would read like this. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. Even though he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. So, in this word play, the language of sickness is surrounded by language of sin and confession.

And James' point is, the person in verse 14 is sick because of sin. They have become ensnared in the things that James has criticized throughout this letter.

And they are refusing to humble themselves before the Lord. So the Lord has brought them low with sickness. Now, we must take care in drawing a straight line between sin and sickness.

But it is something that the Bible is clear about. Deuteronomy 28, we see it there. Amos 4.11. The reason the people are sick is because of their high-handed sin, and God has brought them low with sickness.

[21:01] But, of course, the clearest example is in 1 Corinthians chapter 11. The apostle Paul there, he says, Well, what's very interesting in 1 Corinthians 11 is that the sins that Paul mentions there, that is, the rich are feasting and getting drunk at the Lord's table, and they're not taking care of others who are going hungry.

At the Lord's table, at the supper of the Lord, this occasion that is supposed to mark the unity of the church, there is, guess what? Partiality and a lack of neighbor love.

The two of the big things that James has criticized throughout this letter. But in Corinth, Paul says that this kind of behavior, this partiality, this absence of neighbor love, chapter 11, verse 30, is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.

Paul is very clearly connecting the sickness and even the death, in some cases, of some of the people and their sin. Now, to be very clear, not all sickness is a direct result of specific sin, and actually that is usually the wrong conclusion to draw.

Jesus says so in John chapter 9, It wasn't the boy or his parents that sinned to cause his blindness. The Lord had a bigger purpose at play. The point here is that in some cases of high-handed unrepentance, particularly where that unrepentance threatens the witness and the unity of the church, the Lord humbles us with sickness.

[ 22 : 36 ] And he does it because he wants to get our attention, because he loves his church, and he wants to wake us up to our need to repent, because the behavior is destructive to the body. This is why the promise of healing in verse 15 can be so certain.

Do you see that? The prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. If this is just about regular healing, and you're sick, and you call the elders, and they visit, and they pray, and they anoint you with oil, and the pain doesn't lift, and the tumor doesn't shrink, either God has gone back in his word, or you or the elders didn't have enough faith.

Both of those are very damaging ways to think about your relationship with God. But when we see that it is a specific case of sin-related sickness, the certainty of verse 15 fits, because it's about having sin forgiven, and being restored to the fellowship of the church.

So this person has caused a load of harm to these believers. They've created a lot of disunity, and gone against all of the things that James has rebuked, in this letter.

But in this case, they've invited the elders, and by doing that, they are asking the leaders of the church, that they have sinned against, to forgive them, and to restore them. And by taking that initiative, they are showing their repentance.

[ 23 : 56 ] And in this case, the oil then represents another aspect of its use in the Bible. Namely, Psalm 133, the oil on Aaron's beard, the symbol of unity and blessing in life.

A perfect symbol to mark the restoration of a wandering brother or sister. to the fellowship. Just as God will give wisdom to help us understand the purpose of our trials, chapter 1, verse 5, just as He will draw near to us when we draw near to Him, chapter 4, verse 8, just as He will raise us up when we humble ourselves before Him, chapter 4, verse 10, so too He will forgive and restore any who are repentant.

This focus on prayer isn't just for the sick. It is to characterize the church as a whole. Look at verse 16. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power, as it is working. Confession and prayer. That will involve the whole church praying for repentance, for the repentance of those who are sinning, and a restoration of the unity of the body.

It will involve those who are fighting and quarreling, chapter 4, verse 1, to repent to one another and to restore unity. And James insists, don't doubt the power of prayer.

[ 25 : 27 ] Don't doubt the power of prayer of the righteous Christian person, to restore unity and to strengthen the church. He says, if you're concerned about the power of prayer, remember Elijah.

Look at verse 17. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months, it did not rain on the earth.

Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit. Again, Elijah is a striking example. His situation was similar to these early Christians.

He suffered under the rule of apostate Israel, under Ahab and Jezebel. He was forced to go into hiding because of these leaders, and then to go on the run. But he didn't fight back.

He didn't call for a revolution to bring down this ungodly leadership. Instead, he patiently ministered to the poor, caring for the widow of Zarephath, and healing her son.

[ 26 : 29 ] And he pleaded with God for the healing of the nation. And God heard. And he answered, bringing rain and blessing. But the detail that James includes is so important.

Verse 17, He was a man with a nature like ours. It's interesting. Why did James not mention Elijah on Mount Carmel? Impressive Elijah!

Because it is the Elijah of the ordinary that is to be our model. He was a man just like you and me. And yet in prayer, he saw things that seemed impossible actually happen.

And James mentions him here at the end of the letter so that in our own context of opposition, we would follow his example. A man with a nature like ours.

Just a man. But he understood that under God, his prayer could accomplish something. So we are to suffer as Elijah suffered.

[ 27 : 29 ] We are to embrace patience and care for the poor in the face of opposition in the way that Elijah did that. And we endure in prayer for God to bring his plans to cover the earth with his glory to pass in his time.

In verse 19, we do these things together. We call one another to obedience. We do what James has sought to do in this whole letter.

We bring wandering brothers and sisters back from their wandering. A church that suffers and obeys and waits and prays together and does all this with joy because we know that every death, whether it's a death to our ambition, whether it's a death of some dream that we had, or whether it is a physical death, every single one of those will be followed by resurrection.

That's the way it is in the kingdom of God. Every death is followed by a resurrection. And so we can do all of this. We can suffer with joy. We can obey and wait with joy.

And when we rejoice in these things, we will stand when the storms hit. So let us resolve to be that kind of church. Let's pray together.

[ 28 : 58 ] Let's pray together.