

## **Power for Patience (James 5:7-12)**

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A few weeks ago, I had my biannual visit to the dentist, including a rather painful experience with what my boys call "Mr. Thirsty." You know the little suction thing they stick in your mouth so you don't swallow the junk they're spraying on your teeth? Usually it just sits in there and does its job. This time, however, it had a mind of its own.

The crazy thing managed to work into the back of my mouth, creating an incredibly painful suction on a little piece of skin with the force of an intake valve at a water treatment plant. And the timing was such that I couldn't readily say something about it, what with all the other instruments poking in there, my mouth held wide open, and water spraying all over the place.

My wife says I should have waved my hand or something to get the dentist attention. She's probably right (as usual), but in this case I tried subtly shifting my head to one side. I tried lowering my chin to my chest. I tried wiggling it into a new position after he pulled it out for a glorious 3 seconds only to feel it drop right back into the same spot. Eventually, I closed my eyes and tried to ignore the pain, which failed miserably and only made it get worse.

If, in that moment, someone whispered in my ear, "Matthew, just be patient," I don't think I would have responded very well. "What do you mean, 'Be patient!?' It feels like this thing is slurping up my skin into little bite-sized pieces. Has Mr. Thirsty ever done that to you? I DON'T THINK SO. So stop telling me to be patient because I'm about to go nuts in this dental chair over here and am trying VERY hard to not bite someone's hand!"

My 30-minute ordeal is nothing compared to friends of mine in this church who have battled chronic pain for decades. But it illustrates something all of us can relate to, doesn't it? In the midst of suffering, we don't want to be patient. We just want the pain to go away as fast as possible. Asking questions like, "How does God want me to respond?" almost makes us even more angry. All we want, all we care about, all we're focused on, is doing whatever it takes to make the pain go away NOW.

Jas 5:1-6 suggests the poorer members of the church were experiencing significant suffering. Rich employers were cheating them of their wages, functionally condemning their families to starvation and death. They had no recourse. They couldn't take them to court or switch jobs the way we do. If a friend came to you in an identical situation, how would you counsel them? What does James say? V. 7, "Be patient, therefore, brothers..."

Be patient? You're kidding me. Patient with the sheep blocking the road on my way home last night? Sure. Patient with someone robbing me and putting my family in danger? Absolutely not. And you know what, James, if you keep telling me to be "patient" I think I'll go find another church where people are a little more empathetic.

Earlier this year we learned in the Psalms that God never says, "Just trust me." He always gives us sturdy reasons. There are reasons for fear, but there are better reasons to trust the Lord. The same principle holds true with patience. The Lord, speaking through James in these verses, doesn't just say, "Be patient." He gives us sturdy reasons for patience grounded in spiritual certainties that are just as real as our pain.

In vv. 7-8, James states his main point positively – be patient. In vv. 9-11, he states it negatively – don't grumble. And in v. 12 he gives us a further implication – keep your word. And each time, he never just says, "Do this," or, "Do that." He gives a reason to respond THIS way and not THAT way. So what should we do in the midst of suffering?

### **1) PRACTICE PATIENCE BECAUSE THE LORD IS COMING BACK SOON (vv. 7-8)**

The biblical call to patience in suffering is not a summons to resignation like Eeyore in Winnie the Pooh. "Oh well, I guess if I'm going to follow a suffering Savior my life will be hard too. I don't know why I expected otherwise. Tomorrow will probably be even worse than today. And if I try to change things, I'll probably just make it worse." Nor is the biblical call to patience in suffering a command to wait indefinitely. "God says all things work together for the good of those who love him, but who knows when or how that will happen. I guess I'll just believe it anyway." No.

Look at what James says in v. 1. Biblical patience has an object, a focal point fueling glad expectation with a definite timeline. "Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord." Friends, the future return of Christ Jesus in glory to reward the righteous, punish the wicked, and make all things new, isn't just some future event in the story of redemption. It's high-octane fuel for patience amidst all the sorrows of this life. Why? Because Christ's return guarantees the personal and collective vindication of all who choose to trust, obey, and wait for him.

Rev 20:11–12, "Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done."



Rev 21:3–5, "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.' And he who was seated on the throne said, 'Behold, I am making all things new.'"

When someone sins against you, what do you feel? When you run smack into the wall of chronic illness, broken relationship, sexual abuse, or premature death, what do you feel? We long for justice. We long for deliverance. We long for healing. We long for someone, somewhere, to make them pay or make it go away.

And in that moment, friend, when you feel like taking matters into your own hands, retaliating against your enemies or doing whatever it takes to escape the pain, regardless of the consequences, the Lord has three words to say to you: "Wait for me." That doesn't mean we fail to work for justice in obedience to God's commands. It does mean we stop striving to right every wrong right now and start trusting Jesus to deliver us on the day he returns. It's his job to make all things new. It's our job to wait for him.

When your boss gives you an unfair evaluation, don't file suit against everyone in sight, wait for Jesus. When your siblings whisper lies behind your back, don't launch a reputation campaign, wait for Jesus. When your spouse hurts you for the umpteenth time, don't give them a taste of their own medicine or take off your ring, wait for Jesus. When the doctor says, "I don't know why you're so sick," wait for Jesus. When people in the church disappoint you, don't run from his blood-bought bride, wait for Jesus.

Patience in suffering isn't a last resort as Christians when all other attempts have failed. It should be our first response because it's the only attitude of heart that enables us to navigate suffering in a way that is pleasing to him.

I remember the first time I planted seeds with one of our boys. I helped them push the tiny seed into the ground, guided them in pouring the right amount of water into each pot, and then placed the tray under the plant light in our garage. What do you think he asked me the very next morning? "Hey dad, has my cucumber come up yet?" He hadn't quite learned that farming takes a lot of patience, waiting on biological processes to occur that are outside my control.

If you lived in Palestine in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, you had even less control over the whole operation than we do today. They didn't have mechanical pumps with automated irrigation. They were completely dependent on receiving the early rain shortly after

sowing and the late rain just before harvest. In the Old Testament prophets repeatedly use the early and late rains as illustrations of dependence on the faithfulness of God, of our need to wait on God to do what only God can do.

Friends, like a wise farmer, we must fix our eyes on the day of Christ's return in the midst of suffering and be patient. If you're a Christian, the sorrow that fills your heart to overflowing will not have the final word. So "strengthen your heart," as James says. Stand firm in the promise that Jesus is coming soon. Patience isn't a sign you don't care about your present sorrows. It's an expression of trust that the vindication and healing God alone provides is what we ultimately need and is worth the wait.

But Matthew, God's people have been waiting for two-thousand years. I've been waiting for 20 years and my sister still hasn't said sorry, my boss still hasn't said, "I was wrong," my spouse still hasn't said, "Will you forgive me?" my doctor still hasn't said, "We figured out the problem." Why is God taking so long?

2 Pet 3:8–9, 13, "But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. 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...But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." In the midst of suffering, practice patience because the Lord is coming back soon.

## **2) PUT OFF GRUMBLING BECAUSE THE LORD'S PURPOSE WILL PREVAIL (vv. 9-11)**

When you buy a piece of property with a decrepit building, you have to demo the old structure before you can begin construction, right? The same is true in our hearts. Growing in patience in the midst of suffering, involves more than waiting for the vindication and healing God alone provides. It also involves putting off grumbling and complaining. In vv. 9-11, James focuses on the "put off" and gives us two more sturdy reasons to practice patience. V. 9, "Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged..."

It's easy to do, isn't it? When someone is annoying us, or hurting us, or just being difficult, we might be street-smart enough to not retaliate directly, but man oh man, it feels good to snag a friend or maybe all our "friends" on social media and say, "I just don't understand why 'people' think \_\_\_\_\_ is ok. Do they have any idea how wrong that is?" Maybe we even go for the kill and use their actual name.

What are we chasing when we do that? We're looking for a combination of affirmation and sympathy. We want people to validate our assessment of the situation and agree we're right and they're wrong, which makes us king of the victim hill. We want all our friends to side with us against the "bad people," whether it's an unreasonable spouse or the "other" political party.

Why is grumbling or complaining about other people always wrong, regardless of the circumstances? Because whenever we grumble or complain, we're trying to do God's job for him. We're posturing ourselves as the authoritative judge of their life, when the true Judge, Jesus, is actually "standing at the door." He doesn't look kindly on pretenders.

If you decide he's waiting too long and start denigrating and condemning other people, especially in the public square, guess what will happen when he returns? Jesus will condemn you for all the way you condemned other people. The problem isn't making moral assessments of what other people are saying or doing. That's called biblical discernment. The problem is that instead of patiently waiting for God to vindicate us and confirm our assessment of the situation, we take matters into our own hands and start berating, accusing, complaining, and tearing down the people who hurt us in the ears of all who will listen. It happens at the office, it happens at home, it happens in church, and (even more commonly) it happens online.

Friends, Jesus is the Judge. You're not. I don't care how many other people are grumbling and complaining. You're a Christian. You're a follower of Christ. That means you march to the beat of a different drummer. And if you are just as vitriolic and spiteful as everyone else with what you say in person or online in the name of "standing up for what's right," people will start to doubt whether this "Judge" you claim to serve is really worth waiting for. Maybe he's not. Maybe we should just fight it out on our own.

If you refuse to grumble or complain when you are hurt and oppressed, you will be misunderstood. People will think you should be more "angry," that you're not standing up for yourself, or don't understand how badly you've been wronged. Let Jesus take care of them, friend. Patience isn't passivity. It is a tremendously powerful witness to the existence and power of our coming King.

Two examples from the Old Testament in vv. 10-11 show us what that sort of steadfastness looks like in action and give us another reason to follow their example. Think about how the prophets in the Old Testament illustrated the truth of their message. Men like Jeremiah were terribly mistreated by their fellow Israelites, despised and hated for doing what the Lord told them to do. Yet they remained patient, even when obeying God made things harder, not easier. Perfect? No. Faithful? Yes. They

didn't grumble and complain, asserting their own authority or their own name. They spoke in the name of the Lord, testifying to his supremacy as the One to whom their countrymen would give account.

Or think about the life of Job. He refused to stop trusting the goodness and righteousness of God, even when it heightened the confusion and pain he experienced in the midst of suffering. His wife told him to curse God and die. Job refused and chose to pour out his anguished soul to the Lord in prayer. Perfectly? No. Faithfully? Yes.

And what happened in the end after the Lord graciously exposed his pride, teaching him to stand in awe of the God whose ways are higher than our ways? Job 42:10, 12, "And the LORD restored the fortunes of Job...and the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before...And the LORD blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning." What does that prove? Even when God's purposes defy our feeble understanding, they will ultimately prove to be exceedingly good. Or as James says in v. 11, "And you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful."

Remember this, my Christian brother or sister. God isn't compassionate and merciful to you despite your suffering. He is even now fulfilling his compassionate and merciful purposes in your life through your suffering. His good purposes prevailed for the prophets. His good purposes prevailed for Job. His good purposes will prevail for you too, if you're willing to patiently trust and wait for him. So put off grumbling, not only to avoid Christ's judgment, but also so you can see the good purposes of the Lord come to fulfillment in your life.

### **3) KEEP YOUR WORD BECAUSE THE LORD KEEPS HIS (v. 12)**

At first glance, the admonition in v. 12 against casually swearing oaths to "add" integrity to our words seems disconnected from the focus on suffering in vv. 7-11. The main point is simple enough. Don't swear by something outside of yourself to make people believe you – i.e. "I swear to God I'm telling the truth." Instead, let your "yes" be yes and your "no" no. If you make a promise to someone, keep it. If you make a commitment to someone, honor it.

Don't create a hierarchy of integrity where a simple "yes" carries less weight than a "yes" accompanied by an oath. And don't look for reasons to get out of doing what you said you would do. "Oh, well, I know I said "yes," but I can change my mind because I didn't swear by heaven." Nonsense, James says. As Jesus urges us in Matt 5, practice honesty and be faithful to your word. Why? Because "liars" are one of the groups whom Christ



will condemn at the final judgment. That's a promise God will not fail to keep. So take care to keep yours.

Have you ever been in a situation where you made a promise or commitment to someone, but as the deadline approached or the evening arrived, you realized, "I think there's a more pleasant opportunity over here? I think if I do what I said I would do, my life will feel harder, not easier. I'm afraid I'm going to experience some suffering if I follow through, so let me see if I can find a way to back out."

Part of the reason our culture is averse to making and keeping commitments, even as professing Christians, is that keeping our options open gives us a sense of control over our suffering. Why should I bother keeping my word if it makes my life harder not easier, whether I said "yes" to something formal like marriage vows or something informal like an RSVP to a friend?

The biblical answer includes avoiding the judgment of God, as James says in v. 12. But it ultimately goes back to the promise back in V. 11 that the Lord's good purposes in our life cannot be thwarted by suffering and will actually be accomplished through suffering, including the suffering brought about by keeping our word. So if you make a commitment, keep it. If you promise to do something, do it. Don't keep your options open to avoid suffering. Be faithful to your word, friend, even when it costs you something, because you know the Lord will be faithful to his.

## **CONCLUSION**

James opened his letter by raising our eyes to behold the good work God accomplishes through our suffering. As he prepares to close, he returns to the same theme, except this time, his focus is squarely on our response. Since Jesus is coming soon, since Jesus is the Judge of all the earth, and since Jesus is compassionate and merciful in all his ways, how should we respond? Two words. Be patient and be faithful. That's the main point. In the midst of suffering, be patient and faithful, knowing the Judge of all will bring his good purposes to pass.

Doing as much will never be easy, friends. I probably don't need to tell you that. But on the final day, when you see your King face to face, you will not regret the choice you made now to wait for his vindication, to stop trying to do his job for him by grumbling and complaining, and to keep your word, even when it costs you something. His compassion and mercy will prevail in our life if only we are willing to wait. Let's go to the Lord in prayer right now and ask for his help.

