

Marks of a Faith That Works

A Faith that Works... ***Patiently Endures Suffering*** James 5:7-12

⁷ Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. ⁸ You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. ⁹ Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door! ¹⁰ Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹ As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy. ¹² Above all, my brothers, do not swear-not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned. James 5:7-12

Patience...it's a rare commodity in a high-speed world. After all, how can a society that exists on fast food, high speed internet, and packaged cake mixes teach patience to our children?

The fact of the matter is that *we don't like to wait...* for anything. Young people don't like to *wait* for sexual intimacy, drivers don't like to *wait* on red lights, and . Little wonder that fast food is so popular these days. Have you ever noticed that the more expensive a restaurant is, the more you have to wait? Mary Alice and I went one Sunday afternoon to the Olive Garden. Now this is not a slam against the Olive Garden. I love the Olive Garden. But while I was there, I counted five waits! I waited to have a seat, I waited for the menu, I waited to order, I waited to get my food, and finally I waited for the bill. And they have the nerve to call the person who serves you the "waiter."

The story is told of Phillip Brooks, a famous pastor of the 19th Century. One day he was in his office, pacing back and forth. He was obviously very frustrated. Someone walked into his office and, noticing his agitation, said, "What the matter, pastor?" Brooks replied, "I'm in a hurry and God isn't!"

Impatience causes so many of our problems in the Christian life. Abraham was impatient and decided to develop his own strategy for having a child. And the ongoing consequences of that choice are seen in our news on a daily basis. Moses was impatient and struck the rock. As a result, he never entered the Promises Land. Peter was impatient and tried to defend Jesus with the sword. Little good that did!

Not only do we have a hard time patiently waiting for what we want. We have an extra hard time patiently enduring what we don't want. And that seems to be the main emphasis in James 5:7-12.

Four times James urges you and me to patience in difficult circumstances. Just what does he mean by that word? In James' language, the word is a compound formed from two words: *makros*, meaning "long," and *thumos* meaning "passion" or "heat." It's this word, *thumos*, that

eventually developed into our English word thermometer. So to be patient is to have a long fuse, to take a long time to get hot. In older English it's translated "longsuffering."

But James also uses another word in these verses that brings in another angle to the idea of patience. It's the word "perseverance." It means literally "to stay under." Imagine swimming underwater the full length of an Olympic size pool. Your friend has bet you that you can't make it, but you're certain you can. So you take that initial dive and under the water you go. About half way your lungs begin to demand that you come up for air. But your perseverance (or maybe your pride!) keeps you under the water all the way to the end. That's the meaning of endurance or perseverance. It means "to stay under."

WHEN DO WE MOST NEED PATIENCE?

When do we most need such persevering patience in our lives? When I look at my life, I find that I am in great need of patience when *circumstances are uncontrollable*. And I believe that's why James gives us in this passage the illustration of the farmer. Notice again what he says in verse 7: "See how the farmer *waits* for the land to yield its valuable crop and how *patient* he is for the autumn and spring rains."

Being born and raised in the city, it wasn't until I met my wife and her family that I began to better understand some of the uncontrollable circumstances that a farmer faces on a daily basis. For one, he can't control the weather. I used to find it rather strange that every time I talked with my father-in-law on the phone, he would ask about the weather. When we lived in Texas and called home, he asked "Well, how's the weather?" When we live in France and called home, he asked the same thing, "Well, how's the weather?" Now that we live in Portland, he doesn't ask any more. He knows it's always raining!

But as the years wore on and I spent more time on the farm, I began to realize just how dependent our family was on the weather. If it rains too much, the crop rots. If it rains too little, the crop dries up and dies. But in either case, the farmer has zero control.

There are many circumstances of our lives where you and I have absolutely no control whatsoever. Many of these circumstances are painful and we would prefer to avoid them at all costs. But we can't, because we're not in control. The more we experience life, the more we realize that we cannot *control* life. Today, what are the circumstances in your life that you cannot change, but you are trying to control?

Not only do we face circumstances that are uncontrollable, but we face *people who are unchangeable*. James may well be thinking of this when he says in verse 10: "Brothers, as an example of *patience* in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord."

What was the role of a prophet in the Old Testament? It was not only to *foretell* the future, but to *forth tell* into peoples lives. It was to bring about change in the lives of God's people. But the prophets faced one big problem: People don't like change!

Maybe there are people like that in your life. Sometimes we call them EGRP's, i.e. Extra Grace Required People. The prophets faced a whole nation of them! Maybe you're in a difficult marriage and you want to get out because you're convinced that your partner just won't change. Maybe you have children that are far from the faith and you see little if no change whatsoever in their degree of spiritual receptivity. Or maybe at work, you feel persecuted for your faith in Christ by people who don't want to change and grow spiritually. James is saying, "Welcome to the club of the prophets." You think you've got it bad? Look at what some of them went through, even to the point of death.

But not only do we face uncontrollable circumstances and unchangeable people. We have great need of patient endurance when *problems remain unexplainable*. Here I put the great mysteries of life that leave us puzzled and confused and doubting and crying.

Night before last Mary Alice and I watched "The Question of God," the story of C.S. Lewis' journey to faith. At age 11 he lost his mother, at age 18 he lost his faith, and at age 63 he lost his wife. At each juncture, it was the pain of unexplainable problems that brought Lewis to a new level of crises followed by growth.

James says in verse 11, "Look at Job." In the short space of two days Job lost everything. Family, friends, and fortune went out the window. From the standpoint of the average person looking on, he went from the pinnacle of success and fortune to the depths of spiritual, material and emotional impoverishment. God took away everything in Job's life except a nagging wife and the only advice she had to offer was "Curse God and die!" Now how's that for a support system!

Job is a picture of the unexplained problems of life, the mysteries of life, those things that we may *never* understand this side of heaven, if then. For 37 chapters in the story of Job, God is silent. All Job has are his lousy counselors who give their stereotyped, pat answers.

In which of these situations are you needing patient endurance today? Where do you need a "long fuse" or the ability to "stay under?" Are you faced with uncomfortable and uncontrollable circumstances? Or maybe it's with extra-grace-required people. Or maybe your facing some of the unexplainable problems of life. In each of these situations, *how* am I to patiently endure difficulty?

HOW AM I TO PATIENTLY ENDURE SUFFERING?

1. LOOK ... *ahead* to the coming of the Lord (5:7-8)

Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. James 5:7-8

In the Mediterranean climate of the day, two seasons of rain were normal in order to produce a successful harvest: the early and the latter rains, or the autumn and spring rains. And if those rains didn't come, there was a pretty good chance that the dry season, which ran from May through September, would produce a drought and destroy the harvest. The farmer, both then and

now, faces uncontrollable circumstances. And so do you and I. The longer I live life, the more I realize that there are very few things that I can control.

By the way, I believe that's why James includes verse 12 in this section. "Above all, my brothers, do not swear-not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned." Why? You have no control over the circumstances of your life. While in some cases, taking an oath was acceptable in the Old Testament, it seems that by the time of the New Testament, oaths were used so frequently that they had lost their meaning. It's like a child saying, "I cross my heart and hope to die," all the while crossing their fingers behind their back. And so Jesus says: "Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one" (Matthew 5:37).¹

Life is uncertain, circumstances are uncertain, but Jesus' return is absolutely certain. If we are certain Christ came the first time, we can be all the more certain that he will come the second time. Did you know that the Bible says more about Christ's second coming than it says about his first coming? More than 1800 verses in the Bible speak of Jesus' return.

The Phillips translation of verse 8 reads, "So you must be patient, resting your hearts on the *ultimate certainty*." What is that "ultimate certainty?" It is the *parousia* (in the language of James), the coming of the Lord. It's what the Bible calls the "blessed hope" or the "happy hope." The word was often used by the Greeks of James' day to refer to the official visit of a monarch to one the cities under his jurisdiction. Someday Jesus is going to make his official revisit to the world under his jurisdiction. And when he does, all the wrongs will be made right and every tear wiped away.

That hope can keep you and me going in the most difficult of circumstances. I think of this when I remember the birth of each of my four children. The birth pangs that every mother endures are bearable as she keeps her heart focused on the joy of delivery. That ecstatic, unforgettable moment when a child enters the world brings perspective to the pain and struggle of labor. I think of this, too, each time we pray as a family. Since the loss of his oldest brother, Justin often conclude our prayers, "And Jesus, please come back soon." You see, that blessed hope keeps us going. That blessed hope helps you and me "stay under" in the most trying of times, because our perspective of the future gives us perseverance in the present.

Nobody could say it better than Paul in Romans 8. Listen to how he describes this hope that gives you and me perseverance.

¹⁸ Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will give us later. ²² For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ And even we Christians, although we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, also groan to be released from pain and suffering. We, too, wait anxiously for that day when God will give us our full rights as his children, including the new bodies he has promised us. ²⁴ Now that we are saved, we eagerly look forward to this freedom. For if you already have something, you don't need to hope for it. ²⁵ But if we look forward to something we don't have yet, *we must wait patiently and confidently*.
Romans 8:18, 22-25 NLT

2. LOOK ... *back* at the example of the prophets and Job (5:9-12)

How can I patiently endure suffering in the present? I must look ahead to the return of Christ. But I must also look back, at the example of those who have gone before. That's what James is saying, beginning in verse 10:

Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy. James 5:10-11 *NIV*

Frequently, the Bible calls us to look at the example of those who have gone before. For there is really nothing "new under the sun." Do you think your circumstances are unique to you? Do you really believe that what you're going through is different or harder than what others have experienced? Here's what Paul tells us in his letter to the Roman believers: "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" Romans 15:4.

We can learn so much from the examples of believers who have gone before us. And the Bible speaks with such ruthless honesty and transparency about the lives of believers in the biblical story. Just look at Hebrews 11 and the "Hall of Faith." If you have family members who pull you down, look back at Abel (Hebrews 11:4). If you are struggling to live a godly life in an ungodly society, look back at Enoch (Hebrews 11:5). If you feel misunderstood, look back to Noah (11:7). If you are in the throws of transition and having a crises of faith, look back to Abraham (11:8-10). If you feel abused and violated, look back to Joseph (11:22). If you are facing an overwhelming task that God is calling you to, look back to Moses (11:24-29). If you are facing circumstantial walls that you cannot scale, look back to Joshua (11:30). If you are facing the sins of your past, look back to Rahab (11:31).

Here James gives us two specific examples: the prophets and Job. The prophets, as we've pointed out, faced their share of unchangeable people. Many of them spoke, but few listened. Some of them, like Jeremiah, were told from the outset that nobody would listen. Maybe that's why Jeremiah is often dubbed the preacher's favorite prophet. If we think we have it hard, just look at him!

Who are the "unchangeable people" in *your* life...a husband, a child, a co-worker, a friend? What is our first tendency in such situations? We grumble, we complain. James command of verse 9 cuts to the chase and tells us how we are to respond patiently: "Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!" For those to whom James is writing – those who were poor and suffering difficult circumstances – they were not to grumble and complain even against the wealthy in the church. They were rather to submit their lives into the hands of the One who judges righteously.

If the prophets are an example of how to respond when people are unchangeable, Job is an example of how to respond when problems are unexplainable. Maybe you feel like Job, though I doubt that anyone here has been through the same degree of loss and suffering. But let's face it, when you and I suffer – whatever the circumstances – our pain seems to be worse than anyone

can imagine. But in the suffering of unexplainable problems in life, this passage gives us two words of encouragement.

First, God *is* in control. Notice what verse 11 says: “You have seen what the Lord finally brought about.” A more literal rendering is: “You have seen the outcome of the Lord’s dealings” (NASB). That’s why Job could say: “Though he slay me, yet will I hope in Him” (Job 13:15). And then ten chapters later, at the height of his testing, Job cries out: “When he [God] has tested me, I will come forth as gold.” In the unexplainable problems of life, God wants to shift our attention from what is happening *to* us to what God is doing *in* us. Paul says the same thing in that well know verse of Romans 8:28

The second word of encouragement is this: *God rewards patience*. James says, “As you know, we consider *blessed* those who persevere.” These are the same words as James 1:12 “*Blessed* is the man who perseveres under trial.” Most likely, James’ words come directly from the mouth of Jesus himself:

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”
Matthew 5:11-12

Job experienced this blessing. Job 42:12 says, “The LORD *blessed* the latter part of Job’s life more than the first. He had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen and a thousand donkeys.” Now I don’t think that many of us are in the market for 14,000 sheep or a 1,000 donkeys. But God will bless your patient endurance with character development in this life and eternal reward in the next.

3. LOOK...*beyond* your own circumstances to the suffering Church today.

In the year 2000 over 165, 000 Christians around the world paid the ultimate sacrifice for their faith. Today that number is most likely around 180,000 as it has been increasing each year.

Paul says, “I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church” (Colossians 1:24). What does he mean by that? Were Christ’s sufferings not sufficient for our salvation? Certainly they were. What he means is that before Christ’s return there is an appointed amount of suffering that the Body of Christ will experience. As Christ the Head of the Church has suffered, so we His Body must suffered. “It is appointed unto you not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake,” Paul writes to the Philippians. As our brothers and sisters suffer for their faith, the do so *in Christ*. And as we suffer, we do so *in Christ*. In a very real sense, we are united together in this suffering as we are members of the same Body.

[transition to Communion Service]

Notes

ⁱ In the Old Testament false swearing and the taking of oaths is forbidden (Lev. 19:12; Jer. 5:2; Hos. 4:2; Mal. 3:5). On the other hand God swears by his own name (Gen 22:16; Heb 6:13-18). In the New Testament, Paul took an oath (2 Corinthians 1:23). And in some cases, the taking of an oath is required (Ex 22:10-12). So what's the difference?

False swearing is prohibited as it implicates God in something that is false. This is the main idea of Leviticus 19:12. But is truthful swearing or oath taking acceptable? It seems to be if it pertains to a past event, such as in Exodus 22. In Scripture, what is forbidden is to swear by the name of the Lord concerning a future event over which you have no control. This seems to harmonize well with James 4:13-17. We are rather to say what we mean and mean what we say. Be people of integrity. Our lives should be consistent with our lips. Our walk should be consistent with our talk.

Why does James talk about this: (1) to avoid the situation of Jephthah, who swore an oath that bound him to disastrous consequences (Judg. 11:30-39); (2) to ensure that Christians are not influenced by pagan oath-swearing formulae; (3) to maintain a high standard of truth in all speech; and (4) to avoid involving God in a falsehood if, by chance, what we intend we are unable to accomplish.”