

The Problem with Patience

Book of James

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Bible Text: James 5:7-12

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It is the universal call of God to all his children. It is the call to an uncomfortable place. It's a call to do an uncomfortable thing. You have been called to live in the middle. You may be thinking, "In the middle of what?" In the middle of what theologians would call the "already" and the "not yet." Already Christ has come. Already he has suffered and died and rose again. Already the word of God has been given. Already the Spirit has been given. But not yet has sin been completely defeated. Not yet has the world been restored to what it was designed to be. Not yet has the final kingdom come. We're called to live smack dab in the middle of the already and the not yet. Thankful for the grace of the Lord. But daily aware there's more to come.

And we're called to do a difficult thing, wait. I must confess to you, I'm not good at it. I don't like to wait. Even this afternoon as Louella and I drove back and got in traffic on Kelly Drive, I was confronted again, with how little I like to wait. We've been called to live in the middle of the already and not yet.

Look back with me at James 5 beginning with verse 7. If you could have a textbook on what it means to live with faith in between the already and the not yet it's James 5:7-12. That's what this passage is all about. Let me read it for you,

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

Perhaps there is no more character quality for a believer between the already and the not yet than patience. "Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord." Patience is quietness or heart, rest of soul in the face of uncomfortable delay. Sin causes us not to

like delay because sin causes us to shrink our world down to the present, to the me and mine, to the here and now. And that's why James reminds us of the coming of the Lord. You cannot understand the call to patience unless you view it from the perspective of eternity. Everything that is happening in the here and now is a preparation for then. If there's no such thing as eternity, then patience doesn't make any sense. If there's no such thing as a forever, then the total game is get whatever pleasure as you can get, as fast as you can get it, and as much as you can get in the here and now.

Delayed gratification only makes sense when you embrace that everything that is happening in this moment is God in his grace marching us toward the coming of the Lord, marching us toward the glory of eternity. And when we're there, this wait will seem like a very short wait.

In James's example of a farmer you really get a bit of the theology of patience by way of analogy. Why is the farmer able to wait? You say he's able to wait because he understands that waiting is not useless, it's not meaningless, it's not vain. As the wait goes on, there's something amazing that's taking place. You could say, that the farmer can wait because he understands radical change is taking place even though he can't see it. That seed is generating shoots and those shoots go deeper into the earth and up toward the topsoil. And those shoots will finally make themselves seen and they'll grow a plant and that plant will grow blossoms and those blossoms will end up growing fruit.

You see the biblical view of patience is not just that this is a meaningless moment where I have to sit around waiting for the good stuff to happen. There is radical transformation taking place in the midst of the wait. Waiting is not just about what you will get at the end of the wait. Hear this truth, waiting is about what you will become as you wait. And in the same way that there's radical transformation of that seed until it reaches its full flower and produces succulent fruit, in the same way God is radically changing your heart. He's using the wait to transform you into the image of the Lord Jesus Christ so that your life bears fruit that is eternal and to his glory. Waiting has meaning and purpose.

The farmer gets that. The question is, Do we? Are you so persuaded of the grace to be found in patience and waiting that you celebrate the wait? Do you celebrate the wait? Knowing that in waiting you're now waiting for grace. Are you hearing me? In waiting, you're getting grace.

"You also be patient, establish your hearts for the coming of the Lord is at hand." Again, James is such a good pastor. And he understands for us that waiting often introduces a war in our hearts. Waiting exposes the weakness of our hearts to doubt, to question the goodness of the Lord, to wonder if he is in fact with us, to wonder if he will be in our lives faithful to his promises, if he will make the provisions that he's promised to make us. There's a war being fought in your heart in moments of waiting.

There's an enemy who would whisper, "God is not faithful. God is not near. God does not hear you." And so James in saying, "Establish your hearts," is saying, "Fight the fight of faith. Fight for your own heart. Send the roots of your heart down deep into the

promises of the gospel. Drink in the word of God. Fight for your heart.” I would ask you as your pastor this evening, Are you good at fighting for your heart? Or do make the mistake of going wherever your heart leads you? Allowing yourself to revisit God’s love and his goodness once again?

I love what it says in Romans 4 about Abraham. It says that as Abraham waited those long years for the promised son, Isaac, he grew strong in faith. That’s the way it should be. As in the wait, I meditate on the word of God, I bathe myself in the promises of God. I remember the grace of God in my own life. I do everything I can to feed myself on the rich nutrients of the gospel rather than giving way to the temptation of doubt and fear, and life-shaping questions about the goodness of God.

James continues, he says, “Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged. Behold the judge is standing at the door.” James has a lot to say that we’ve looked at about this area of communication. But, again, this is good pastoral counsel here. If there’s one very prevalent and common sin when we’re forced to wait, it’s the sin of grumbling is it not? In my mind this afternoon was the phrase, “this traffic drives me crazy.” I do want the people to look out their rear view mirror and say, “Paul is behind us.” And part.

And think about this, it’s so easy to minimize this sin of grumbling. It’s so easy for us to view it as a little thing. And it’s so easy for our lives to be characterized by this low drone of complaint because we think that if we were in charge of our lives, we would be better sovereigns. Now, I’ve said it that way for this reason, if you embrace the theology of the sovereignty of God, then you would have to say that every moment of grumbling is in fact grumbling against God. You’ve never had a neutral grumble in your life. Your grumbling is deeply theological. And it evidences a dissatisfaction with the sovereign plan of Almighty God.

In Deuteronomy, when Israel was on the border across the river from the Land of Promise, and the spies came back and said, “It’s filled with other nations and giant warriors and the like,” the people grumbled against God. And God names that grumbling as an act of rebellion against him.

Here’s the scary thing, brothers and sisters, I think we need to own this. It is quite possible for you to sing on Sunday morning, “What ere my God ordains is right,” and give your heart and your mouth to grumbling before you’re back home after the service. It’s very easy for us to sing, “Great is thy faithfulness.” And yet, days later, grumble against the way God brings that faithfulness into our lives with the particular circumstances that he brings our way.

I don’t know if you’re understanding what I’m saying to you this evening, but these struggles we’re talking about this evening are not struggles of the mouth, they are deep struggles of our hearts. Are you resting in the plan and purpose of your Redeemer? Do you really live as if you believe that whatever your Lord ordains is right?

James says, “The judge is standing at the door,” because he wants us to understand the seriousness with which God views what we would often call “a little sin.” Is your life a grumble or is your life a hymn of praise? Are you resting in the purposes of your Lord?

Then James brings before us the prophets. The prophets really understood what it meant to live before God in between the already and the not yet. The Bible tells us the prophets preached things that they didn’t understand. They proclaimed things that their eyes wouldn’t see. They were willing under great duress to put their rest in the Lord and to be faithful in speaking his truth. What a wonderful example of what it means to be patient.

Then look at verse 11 with me, “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.” If patience is at first added to that rest and quietness of heart in the face of uncomfortable delay because I really do trust the plan and purposes of my Redeemer, I really do believe his way is right and best and good, I really do believe that his infinitely wiser than I would ever be, I really do believe I am never, ever qualified to bring him into the court of my judgment. If that’s patience, then steadfastness is patience with legs on it. It’s that firmness of direction and firmness of purpose.

Now, think about this, as God is asking you to wait and the waiting means suffering and the waiting means difficulty, listen, God has chosen for you to suffer, he’s chosen for you to experience difficulty. How do you know that? Well, he’s chosen you to live in a fallen world. And in those moments when that suffering is more severe or that delay is more difficult for you, it’s very easy to begin to flag in your obedience. And your discouragement to begin to let go of good habits. To begin to wonder if it’s worth it to pray, “God doesn’t seem to be listening. What difference does it make if I read my Bible, it doesn’t change anything. Why go to that small group? Those people don’t really understand what I’m going through, they never could unless they went through it themselves. Why attend services of worship, they hymns seem so far from my experience?” It’s very easy to fall into the temptation of wondering if it’s worth it to obey.

Maybe this call to steadfastness is a reminder that there’s never a moment when it’s more important to obey than in that moment when you’re suffering so that your heart and your soul is stimulated by the means of grace that God has given you.

Maybe you’re thinking as you think of Job, “Well, I don’t think Job is a very good example of steadfastness. Job doesn’t seem like a very noble waiter.” And maybe the fact that Job is given as an example here demonstrates how great God’s grace and patience is with our struggle. Job did wait. And oh he waited in a messy way. But Job did not forsake his Lord. And you see the blessing that is to be found in the steadfastness there in the story of Job, it’s not what you think, it’s not just that God returned wealth to Job.

I’d like you to turn with me to Job 42 because there’s a way in which what I’m about to read to you is a living historical demonstration of what James is trying to teach. This is

the end of Job's debate with God and of God's very powerful lecture of Job. Job 42:1, "Then Job answered the Lord and said: 'I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. 'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you make it known to me.' I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.'"

What is the blessing, what is that blessed condition of steadfastness and patience? Here it is. It is a blessing that you could not purchase, you could not deserve, you could not earn. It is the blessing of radical heart change. That's what God's after. And it is not just that at the end of this trial God returns wealth to Job. It is through this trial God has reformed Job. This is a new man, renewed by the uncomfortable grace of a sovereign God.

If you're going to wait, you need to require yourself to remember the character of your Lord. He is not capricious. He is not mean. He is not vengeful. He is a God of glorious mercy and compassion. Hear this truth, brothers and sisters, the wait you've been called to is not in the way of that mercy and not in the way of that compassion, it is a vehicle of both.

I know, you and I long for the mercy of release. We long for the mercy of relief and that's not a bad thing because every time you long for that you're actually longing for eternity. And there are moments when God gives you release and there are moments when he gives you relief. But hear this, what you actually need is the mercy of refinement in this moment. Release will come, relief will come when refinement has done its work.

That's the story of Job. A man who was blessed by God because at the end of the story, Job is a different man.

Then we hit verse 12. It seems as though verse 12 is a completely different topic. "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." Now, James was surely speaking to a culture where people were making oaths all over the place, oaths to heaven and earth and false gods and physical things and it was a terrible thing.

But I want you to look at this passage with me because there's something more than just a warning against the oath. Here are these words again, "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." So he doesn't just say, "Don't make an oath." He continues and says, "Let your 'yes' be yes and your 'no' be no." Listen, your speech should be able to be received at face value because of the character of your heart, not because of some attached oath.

This is a call to integrity. This is a call that no matter what I'm facing, no matter how disappointed I am, no matter how grieved I am, no matter how great the trial is, I will be

a person of character and I will only ever speak what is clear and what is true. And you don't need me to make an oath because I am committed to integrity of heart.

Now, I don't know how this passage greets you. The problem with patience is that you have to have patience to get it. It's just one of those things. I can tell you my response. As I was preparing this message, I said to Louella this afternoon as she asked the question she always asks me every Sunday afternoon, "Well, how's your sermon going?" I love that question. And I said, "Okay." She knew that demanded a follow-up. And I said, "Well, I've actually prepared three sermons." Now, don't be afraid, I'm not going to give the other two this evening. They'll probably show up in a book somewhere. And the reason for that is that I think that is a picture of my own struggle of heart. I read these words and I know that every word of this passage is right. I know how important it is for us to embrace that we don't rule our own lives. That for God's true right and noble purpose we have been called to live in this fallen world. But I find life in a broken world hard. And I found myself sort of metaphorically lifting my Bible to the Lord and saying, "Too high, too high, too high!"

I grumble. I'm not patient. I so quickly can say, "What difference does it make?" And then I remembered Hebrews 4 that I read to you earlier. I am not alone in this struggle. Jesus entered the already and the not yet. And he knew what he would be facing. He knew he'd be facing injustice and rejection. He knew he'd be facing the cross. He knew he'd be facing a borrowed tomb. But he knew that there was blessing on the other side. And not just blessing for him, blessing for us. He did it for us. He did all of that for our salvation. Not just so we could have an eternity with him, praise him it was for that. But he did that so in the here and now we could run to someone who gets it. And not only understands but has purchased our forgiveness, has purchased our empowerment and ultimately has purchased our deliverance.

Listen, James 5 and its call to patience, hear me say this, preaches to you Jesus. He's your hope. He's why you wait. He's how you wait and he meets you in the wait with glorious grace.

Do you know Jesus? Have you found in a hard and broken world remarkable peace and rest in him? He understands and he suffered for your salvation.

Let's pray.

Lord, it is for sure that this passage drives us to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. The call in this passage is too high, too wide, too great apart from the operation of your forgiving, empowering, delivering grace. Rescue us once more by that grace we would pray so that we would find rest in you. In Jesus' name. Amen.