

We continue our study in the New Testament letter written by James. This is a passage about patience, especially the kind of patience and perseverance required in the midst of suffering. If you were here last week, you saw how James specifically condemned the rich who take advantage of and oppress the poor. He said to them, "The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty" (5:4). Understand that many of the people working in the fields and not getting properly paid were in the very churches to which James was writing. And so, on the heels of that, James calls those poor believers to be patient. There are all kinds of ways they might respond to their hardship, but James says to be patient.

I've been in Thailand this past week with three other men from CPC. We were there on a mission to observe and learn about human trafficking, especially in the sex industry. We were with our Mission Partners, Bonita, and Roy Thompson. About twelve years ago, Bonita started a ministry to young women, many of whom began working the streets from a very young age. Bonita has managed to rescue almost a hundred women, give them a home to live in, lead them to Jesus, disciple them, and even send them to college, so they're able to make a living apart from selling their bodies to men. Many of these girls start working the streets at about 14 years old. Almost all of them come from rural villages outside of Bangkok. They're dirt poor, and to support their families, this is all they can do. In some cases, their parents even send them there to do just that. Needless to say, they're victims of oppression and injustice by men and even women with far more resources than them.

The wonderful news is God is at work there, drawing many of these women to himself. We prayed and worshipped with some of these young women Bonita is working with. But what would God say to them? Perhaps he'd say something like what James says in this passage.

Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door! Brothers and sisters, 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 count as 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. Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple "Yes" or "No." Otherwise, you will be condemned. James 5:7-12

Suffering believers should be patient in light of the Lord's coming

Notice four times James calls them "brothers and sisters." He wants to make it very clear he's talking to those in God's family, those who know him as their Father. He calls these brothers and sisters to be patient. In fact, he uses the same word four times in this passage.

In verse 7, he says, "*Be patient, then, brothers and sisters.*" Then, he points to "*how patient*" the farmer must be as he waits for his crop.

In verse 8, he repeats himself, "*You too, be patient...*"

And, finally, in verse 10, he points to the prophets as "*an example of patience.*"

He also twice uses another word that's translated as perseverance. He points to both the prophets and Job as examples of perseverance. Both of these words, patience and perseverance, carry the idea of endurance and fortitude through difficult times. These aren't passive words. They convey a kind of militant waiting, a stubborn refusal to give up and give in, despite what's going on around you. That's why in verse 8, he also says to "*stand firm.*" In other words, don't back down and don't give up.

Obviously, those of us on staff here at CPC, and many of us in this body, have been tested in this in recent weeks. We've had two very sudden and unexpected deaths. It's been a hard season. It'd be easy for us not to stand firm, to not persevere, just to give up and give in. But God's word says to be patient, persevere, and stand firm. He says that to you and me. In whatever challenges you're facing — be patient, persevere, and stand firm.

And that applies to the little things of life as well. Sometimes it's those little, everyday things that try our patience the most. I read a story about a young father pushing a shopping cart in a supermarket with his little son strapped in the front. The little boy was fussing, irritable, and crying. The other shoppers gave them a wide berth because the child was actually pulling cans off the

shelf and throwing them. The father seemed to be very calm. As he continued down each aisle, he murmured gently: "Easy now, Donald. Keep calm, Donald. Steady, boy. It's all right, Donald." A mother who was passing by was impressed by his patience.

She said, "You're sure patient with him."

And then bending down to the little boy, she said, "What seems to be the trouble, Donald?"

The dad smiled and said, "Oh no, His name is Henry. I'm Donald."

For most of us, it's the little things that try our patience the most. It's what happens when you come to church and can't find a parking spot or the music is too loud for your liking. It's the waiting in line at the supermarket when someone decides to have a long conversation with the cashier. It's the small things. It's been said, "Heaven and hell are under every bush." And it's true. The small nuances of our day-to-day attitudes and actions are the stuff heaven and hell are made of. The sarcastic lift of an eyebrow carries the seed of murder since it reveals my wish to diminish someone else's existence. To open a door for an elderly man carrying luggage recalls the Cross since it's a small case in point of putting the other person first. Every attitude, act, and word of ours either speaks of charity or ego. Nothing is neutral.

So James calls us to patience in the big and the small things of life. And twice he tells us what it is we're waiting for. First, in verse 7, he says we're to be patient *"until the Lord's coming."* Then in verse 8, he again says to be patient *"because the Lord is near."* Christians everywhere have always believed Jesus will return. He himself promised it over and over again. Some might argue, "Well, the Lord really wasn't near. Look, 2,000 years have passed, and the Lord still hasn't returned." But remember what the apostle Peter said, *"With the Lord, a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day"* (2 Peter 3:8b). According to the Lord's accounting, only about two days have passed since he made this promise! And so, we continue to believe the Lord is near, and that's what allows us to be patient and to persevere now. James says we're like a farmer who patiently waits for the spring and autumn rains and the harvest that follows. And so, we wait for the Lord to come and make things right. There are certain painful realities of life that only the Lord's return will redeem. But like a farmer, we wait with hope and expectancy. The rains are coming, and the harvest will come soon after. Be patient, persevere, and stand firm in that hope.

Suffering believers should show patience by not grumbling

But what happens when we run out of patience? What happens when we're fed up with waiting because nothing seems to change? We can become very self-absorbed. We can become bitter and resentful and take it out on others. This is why James says in verse 9, *"Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!"* As

we've seen, James often warns us about our speech, what comes out of our mouth, and here he warns against grumbling or complaining against one another. I like the way the New English Bible puts it, *"Do not blame your troubles on one another..."*

We don't normally view grumbling and complaining as very serious, but James sees it as a serious sin, which God will judge. We will all come before the judgment seat of Christ. Though salvation is a gift of God's grace, we'll still give an account of our lives. Jesus said, *"But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they've spoken"* (Matt 12:36). Grumbling will be one of those things God judges. We know as God led his people through the wilderness, they grumbled against God about not having meat, onions, or leeks. God regarded this grumbling against him as a serious sin. A whole generation missed out on the Promised Land as a result.

But grumbling against one another is no less serious. Grumbling against one another often comes out of bitterness and resentment. It reminds me of what Hebrews says,

Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy... See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. Hebrews 12:14-15

A bitter root is a hurt planted in you. It may be intentional or unintentional. Someone doesn't necessarily mean to hurt you, but they do. And bitterness takes root in a heart that harbors resentment and hostility and doesn't deal with hurt by keeping short accounts. The world is full of people who've not dealt with old hurts. They look for things to grumble and complain about. They look for people to blame and find ways to justify the way they feel.

C.S. Lewis warns that we who grumble against one another will become more and more defined by grumbling and live in a hell of our own making. He says,

Hell begins with a grumbling mood, always complaining, always blaming others... but you are still distinct from it. You may even criticize it in yourself and wish you could stop it. But there may come a day when you can no longer. Then there will be no you left to criticize the mood or even to enjoy it, but just the grumble itself, going on forever like a machine. It is not a question of God 'sending us' to hell. In each of us, there's something growing, which will be hell unless it's nipped in the bud.

Suffering believers should consider two examples of patience

Grumbling is one of the ways impatience and a lack of perseverance are expressed in our lives, and so starting in verse 10 again, James drives his point about patience and perseverance home. He puts before us two positive examples of this.

First, he points to the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Maybe he's thinking of Jeremiah, who was thrown in an empty well and left to sink in the cold mud. Had he not been rescued, he'd have died suspended in the muck. Or maybe he was thinking of Isaiah who God told at his commissioning,

He said, "Go and tell this people: "Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.' Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Isaiah 6:9-10a

Imagine calling this man to preach and, at the same time, telling him no one would listen to him!

Finally, I think of Hosea, who was actually called to marry a woman who he knew would cheat on him. God told him to do that so he could be a living object lesson of how his own people had cheated on him.

There are a few things to remember about the patience and perseverance of the prophets. First, they weren't passive in their patience and perseverance, nor were they quiet. Even when persecuted, they continued to speak the truth. Being patient and persevering doesn't always mean you keep your mouth shut. There's a place for denouncing injustice, as the prophets often did. Thomas Aquinas once said,

To bear with patience wrongs done to oneself is a mark of perfection, but to bear with patience wrongs done to someone else is a mark of imperfection and even of actual sin.

The prophets were patient with wrongs done to themselves, not with injustice done to others.

Second, they were human and very honest with God in their humanity. I think of the prophet Elijah who was so weary of fighting the evil King Ahab and his wife, Jezebel, that he went into the desert and asked God to put him out of his misery. They were just like you and me, but God gave them the grace to go on. You can be honest with God. You can cry out and even complain to him.

Third, as James says here, "we count as blessed those who have persevered." Isn't that so true? By the way, "blessed" doesn't mean happy; rather, it means being approved by God; it means having his smile upon your life. You see, a life without struggle and difficulty is bland and tasteless. Macomb Muggeridge put it this way,

Suppose you eliminate suffering, what a dreadful place the world would be. I would almost rather eliminate happiness. The world would be the most ghastly place because everything that corrects the tendency of this unspeakable little creature, man, to feel over-important and over-pleased with himself would disappear. He's bad enough now,

but he would be absolutely intolerable if he never suffered.

Our character is shaped by suffering. Most of us can look back on our lives and see how the hardest things we went through were also the most significant things we went through. Without those hard times, we'd never have grown and experienced the faithfulness of God in quite the same way.

This is confirmed by the second example James points to — Job. He says, "*You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.*" I think we've all heard the story of Job. He was a good man, as good as they get. But then one day he lost pretty much everything — his family and his health and wealth. All he could do was sit there and scrape his boils as his so-called friends tried to convince him he was just getting what he deserved. But Job persevered. What I love is that when you read the book of Job, while he did persevere, he was anything but quiet about it! On one occasion, he said, "*I cry out to you, God, but you do not answer; I stand up, but you merely look at me. You turn on me ruthlessly; with the might of your hand you attack me*" (Job 30:20-22).

But even though Job cried and complained, he never renounced God. In the midst of his suffering, he said this, "*I know that my redeemer lives and that in the end, he will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh, I will see God*" (Job 19:25-26).

William Barclay wrote this about Job,

Job's faith is no groveling, passive, unquestioning submission; Job struggled and questioned and sometimes even defied, but the flame of faith was never extinguished in his heart.

And James reminds us "*of what the Lord brought about*" in Job's life, and how it shows, "*The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.*" Part of this, of course, is the Lord restored Job's fortunes and gave him a new family. But I think a much bigger blessing that came from all this is what the Lord did in Job's heart. When it was all said and done, Job said this, "*My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you*" (Job 42:5). That's what happens when we're patient and persevere in suffering — God becomes more than a being we just know about; he becomes One that we know. "*My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you.*" There's a big difference between knowing about God and knowing God.

While in Bangkok, I was blessed to spend time with my old friend Roy Thompson. Roy is a man who's shown more patience and perseverance in life than anyone I know. As a young pastor, his wife divorced him and left him to raise their two children alone. Then his eight-year-old son, Jon, was hit by a drunk driver while riding his bike. Jon spent the rest of his life as paraplegic. When Jon was in his early 20s, he had to have surgery that required

a blood transfusion. Later they discovered the blood they used was HIV positive. Jon died a few years later of AIDS. Roy married Bonita in his late 40's, and they've lived and ministered in Thailand for the last 15 years. Roy is 84 now, and I've seen, over the course of 40 years, what the Lord has brought about in his life. He's a humble man who's been broken, but he's also a blessed man with a wonderful wife and a great ministry. He'd be the first to say with James, *"The Lord is full of compassion and mercy."* He knows that and has experienced that in a way few of us ever will. That kind of understanding only comes through patience and perseverance.

Suffering believers shouldn't take oaths in God's name

The last thing James does is issue another warning about our speech. Just like in verse 9, where he warned against grumbling, here he warns against oath-taking. He says,

Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear— not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple 'Yes' or 'No.' Otherwise, you will be condemned. v. 9

James isn't talking about cuss words here, nor is he saying never to take an oath or make a promise. Rather, he's referring to a widespread practice back then of affirming a promise with an oath in the name of God. Why is that a big deal? Apparently, it was a common practice to do this in order to bind God to act on their behalf. If they vowed to do something and then evoked God's name, then God would be obligated to do what they'd promised. But if somehow, they didn't follow through, then both they and the Lord would fall into dishonor. Since the honor of God's name was at stake, this was a big deal. So, if I take an oath and invoke God's name, he must act to fulfill it. It was a way of blackmailing God. Instead of seeking God's will and waiting on him, they were forcing his hand.

Scholars have struggled to figure out how this verse fits with what comes before it, but I think it's clear. When we're being oppressed or mistreated like many of these people were, it's easy to make promises and pledges you think might somehow deliver you from a bad situation. And if we just attach God's name to it, then he'll be obligated to come through for us. Instead of waiting and relying on God to act in his own way and his own time, we try to force him to act in our way and our time. James says, "Above all," resist such audacity. Just say a simple "Yes" or "No." And just as he did with the sin of grumbling in verse 9, he says this kind of thing will be judged by God when that day comes.

It's interesting that in the very next verse, which we'll look at next week, James says, *"Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray."* Instead of taking an oath in God's name to get out of trouble, pray. Trust God. Let God work in his own way and his own time.

This reminds of a woman we met in Thailand, who was rescued through Bonita's ministry and now works in her ministry. While we were there, she received a call from her mother back in the village where she grew up. Her mother said the chief of the village wants to marry her and has offered 50,000 bhat for her hand. This man's wife had left him to raise two children, and he needed a new wife. In that culture, it would forever bring shame on her family to refuse that offer. Not only that, she'd have to pay 100,000 bhat, the equivalent of about \$3,500 dollars, to get out of that obligation.

I know that sounds crazy to us, but that's a reality in that culture. What can she do? One thing she shouldn't do is make any promises in God's name she can't keep, like "I swear to God I'll pay the 100,000 bhat if you do not hold this against my family." What she should do is pray and trust God will find a way out for her. This is the ultimate form of patience and perseverance, which again is what this passage is about.

Whether we live in Bangkok or Belmont, God calls each of us to be patient and persevere hardship in the small things as well as the big things. And the only way we can do that is by trusting in God's providence over our lives. Let me close with a quote from John Piper:

Life is not a straight line leading from one blessing to the next and then finally to heaven. Life is a winding and troubled road. Switchback after switchback. And the point of biblical stories like Joseph, Job, Esther, and Ruth is to help us feel in our bones (not just know in our heads) that God is for us in all these strange turns. God is not just showing up after the trouble and cleaning it up. He's plotting the course and managing the troubles with far-reaching purposes for our good and for the glory of Jesus Christ.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2020 Central Peninsula Church South, Redwood City, CA
Catalog No. 1439-9SC