

DIFFICULT TIMES: GOD'S PROMISE BASED ON HOPE

James 5:7-12
January 30, 2011

INTRODUCTION: First century believers, not unlike 21st century believers, were experiencing difficult times. They were struggling with having patience and persevering through difficulties and hardships. James, being the author of what some have referred to as "the handbook on practical Christianity," affirms that real faith produces genuine patience that can allow us to maintain good works, promote peace, and live patiently in anticipation of our Lord's return.

I became a little overwhelmed this week as I prepared this message and sought to understand the spiritual climate in which this passage spoke. In that light, I found myself comparing it to those of you who have lost your jobs; some of you who have lost your homes, car, retirement, hospital insurance, etc.

James tells us that the Lord gives patience in the midst of life's challenges and it marks true believers as a sure sign of real faith. Note: James uses the word patience six times in vv. 7-11.

One writer said, "This passage tells you what to do when you are in a hurry, and God isn't."

James uses words that cause us to look in every direction for answers:

1. Look Upward. 7
2. Look Inward. 8-9
3. Look Backward. 10-11
4. Look Forward. 12

Let me give you 4 Don'ts as we deal with what to "be" during difficult challenges:

1. Don't focus on the situation, or you will be filled with anger.
2. Don't focus on yourself, or you will be filled with self-pity.
3. Don't focus on someone to blame, or you will begin complaining.
4. Don't focus on the present, or you will miss the point of what God is wishing to achieve in your life.

I. BE PATIENT. 7

Would anyone agree, “This is easier said than done!”

A. AN EXHORTATION.

“Patient” – the word stresses non-retaliation. It means to hold one’s spirit in check. It implies the ability to keep calm and cool for a long time, without exhibiting frustration with difficult circumstances.

It is a characteristic of God’s love in 1 Cor 13.
It is characteristic of the fruit of God’s Spirit in Gal. 5:22

In James’ world, some were probably about to crack under pressure of persecution. Yet, he is calling on these believers to face even the most adverse circumstances with courage and calm. It means to be long-tempered or longsuffering.

Proverbs 25:28, “Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls.”

B. ANTICIPATION.

“until the coming of the Lord” – it has been said that the greatest hindrance to patience is a lack of hope.

G. Campbell Morgan declared, “To me, the second coming is the perpetual light on the path which makes the present bearable.”

“Coming” – parousia, which means “being with.” In secular Greek it was a technical expression for a royal visit of a king or one in authority. One in 13 verses in N.T. reference His return.

So, being patient in negative circumstances means we deliberately allow God to handle the situation in His own way and in His own time. Like the farmer waiting for a harvest, “be patient.” Not a passive resignation, but rather patient, expectant waiting on the Lord. When people are hurting, they frequently express their hope for Christ’s return. Hard times make us long for Christ’s return.

C. ILLUSTRATION.

“See how the farmer waits” – according to the Greek Church Father, Clement (AD150), he informs us that James and his brother Jude were farmers. This explains why James used such a vivid illustration from farm life.

In Palestine, farmers plow and sow in the autumn. Therefore, the autumn rains are necessary to soften the soil and to help the seeds germinate. The harvest is in the spring. A farmer counts on spring showers to help the crops mature. The farmer cannot bring about the autumn and spring rains. He is totally dependent upon the Lord. Therefore, the farmer waits patiently. The harvest is worth the wait. In the autumn he looks up and is calm as he awaits the autumn rains. The same is true in the spring.

There is a period after the seeds are planted when there is no visible evidence that anything is growing, though God is at work underground. The farmer knows he cannot hurry his crop to harvest. He continues to wait patiently.

Waiting periods are never without trials and testings.

II. STAND FIRM. 8-9

When we are in a waiting period it is easy to become irritated and frustrated. Some of us turn to holding grudges, murmuring, and grumbling. There is also potential within us to become bitter and resentful toward others.

A. STAND FIRM. 8

“establish your hearts” – an active voice and means to prop, to strengthen your being. The subject is to take action.

Same word is used in Luke 9:51, “He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem” – resolutely.

It’s an inner sense of stability; a decisive act.

Williams translation, “You must put iron into your heart” – New English Bible calls upon them to be “stout-hearted.” It is their personal duty to develop an attitude of courage and firmness in facing their circumstances.

Chuck Swindoll calls for the 50/20 principle.

Genesis 50:20, “But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.”

Joseph

Psalms 105:17-18, “He sent a man before them — Joseph — who was sold as a slave. they hurt his feet with fetters, He was laid in irons.

Iron came into his soul

B. STAY CLEAN. 9

“Do not grumble against one another” – when pressures mount, there is a temptation to divide.

When we are experiencing the valleys of life and we look around at other Christians who seem to be sailing right along, what do we do? When we have lost our job and our best friend’s husband just got a promotion, what do we do? The word grumble (groan) means to sigh with an inner unexpressed feeling. James is encouraging them to “look inside and be clean.”

“Behold, the Judge is standing at the door” – knowing that the Judge could at any moment step into the middle of their conversation and evaluate them should have motivated those would be grumblers to reassess their conduct.

III. BE AWARE. 10-11

Romans 15:4, “For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.”

A. EXAMPLE OF THE PROPHETS. 10

“Take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience.”

James’ point is that the prophets suffered, not because they did anything wrong, but because they were doing right.

Hebrews 11:36-38, “Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented — of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth.”

NOTE: v.11a, “Indeed we count them blessed who endure.” James is saying that when the righteous suffer, the smile of God rests upon such a life.

Malcolm Muggeridge, Jesus Rediscovered, wrote, “Suppose you eliminated 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.”

Kent Hughes, “Our moral development, our character, is largely dependent upon the experience of suffering. Without trials we would be morally dwarfed. The study of the lives of great people reveals there is a consistent link between the crucible and true greatness.”

Psalms 119:67-68

“Before I was afflicted I went astray,
But now I keep Your word.
You are good, and do good;
Teach me Your statutes.”

Psalms 119:71

“It is good for me that I have been afflicted,
That I may learn Your statutes.”

- David was hunted by Saul
- Jeremiah was imprisoned and thrown in a well
- Daniel thrown in a lion’s den
- Stephen – Acts 7:52, “Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers”
- Paul was beheaded

TROUBLE CAN TEACH:

1. Trouble promotes trust.
Trouble knocks secondary things away, sharpens our focus; forces us to look to God
2. Trouble brings us near to God.
3. Trouble strengthens our communion with God

B. EXAMPLE OF PERSISTENCE. 11

Job placed in 3 categories: DISTRESS, DEFENSE, DELIVERANCE

What an encouragement to know that God does not expect stoic perseverance in the midst of difficulties. He knows we are clay. He understands tears. He accepts our questions. But He does demand that we recognize our finiteness and acknowledge there are processes at work beyond our comprehension. A plan far bigger than us is moving toward completion. And God demands that we, like Job, hold on to our faith and hope in God.

Note the end of verse 11, “that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful”

Job 42:1-6

“Then Job answered the Lord and said:

‘I know that You can do everything,
And that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You.’
You asked, ‘Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge?’
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.
Listen, please, and let me speak;
You said, ‘I will question you, and you shall answer Me.’
I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear,
But now my eye sees You.
Therefore I abhor myself,
And repent in dust and ashes.”

1. Job saw the Lord as never before.
2. Job’s end was better than his beginning.

IV. BE CAREFUL. 12

James is talking about during our times of stress, we call God into our circumstances and present Him to give validity to our commitments. Matthew 5:34-37 reminds us that anything beyond a simple yes or no is evil.

In times of oppression or persecution, one may be tempted to deny his guilt by reinforcing his statement with an oath. An oath calls upon God as a witness to one’s statement and implicates Him to punish the swearer if falsehood is spoken.

James – say what you mean and mean what you say.
Calling upon us to be people of integrity.