



The Truth about Patience

James 5:7-11

How should we respond in the face of suffering?

Over the past few weeks, we've heard some pretty tough words from James. Last week in particular, we read James' condemnation of the rich landowners who were cheating, stealing from and imprisoning their poor farmhands. Those men had (*past tense*) "fattened themselves in the day of slaughter!" As Jason said: this isn't a turn-or-burn message. It's all burn.

In these verses, James turns back to his main audience, scattered Jewish Christians, many of whom were poor and oppressed by the rich landowners James just condemned. To those who were rotting away in debtor's prison or watching their children die of starvation, James offers these "encouraging" words: "Be patient, brothers, until the Lord's coming." In other words: "Just sit tight for now. Everything will be fine when Jesus comes back."

Really? Seriously??? And in the meantime what are we supposed to do?

What are the alternatives to patience?

We have at least three options.

First, we can react with anger and violence. We can take matters into our own hands instead of leaving them in God's hands. But James already warned us away from this option. James 1:20 says, "...man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires." Anger and violence aren't God's way.

Second, we can react by turning on each other. But James says, "Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged" (5:9). Gripping, carping, grumbling and moaning like that just distract us from what we're supposed to be doing. We're supposed to be serving God and building for his kingdom. And even we believers will be judged "for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Third, we can be patient and put our faith in God's mercy and compassion. But what, exactly, does that mean? Does that mean we should sit around and take our lumps? Turn the other cheek? Walk the extra mile? Yes and no.

God calls us to an active, enduring, persevering kind of patience.

God wants "farmer-patience." Whether we're talking about the first- or twenty-first century, a farmer can't do anything to make his crops grow once the seed is in the ground. It's in God's hands, and he has to wait for God to deliver. But the farmer doesn't sit around just watching his grass grow. The farmer *works* diligently getting ready for the harvest, even though he doesn't know for sure what or when God will deliver.

God wants "prophet-patience." The prophets did what God asked them to do. They "spoke in the name of the Lord." They *persevered* despite their suffering and many times without seeing any results.

God wants "Job-patience." It didn't matter how unfair Job's suffering was. And it didn't matter what advice he received from the "world"—in the form of his friends and even his wife. He *endured* his suffering without ever losing his faith in God.

That's the kind of patience James is talking about!

God has work for us to do even while we are waiting!!!

It's important to remember that James says to be patient "until the Lord's *coming*" not "until our *going*." God is coming *here* to reign. He will set up his kingdom *on earth*. The work we do here and now in the name of the Lord—while we wait for perfection to come—is all part of building for his kingdom.

"What you do in the Lord is not in vain. You are not oiling the wheels of a machine that is about to roll over a cliff. You are not restoring a great painting that's about to be thrown into the fire. You are not planting roses in a garden that's about to be dug up for a building site. You are—strange though it may seem—accomplishing something that will become in due course part of God's new world. Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or to walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one's fellow human beings and for that matter one's fellow nonhuman creatures; and of course every prayer, all Spirit-led teaching, every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world—all of this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make. What we do in Christ and by the Spirit in the present is not wasted. It will last all the way into God's new world." (N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*)

Patience is acting in faith while waiting for God to act.