

Sunday Service — 17 January 2021

Michael Smith

OT reading: Psalm 30

NT reading: James 5:7–11

---

Well, the letter of James is very much concerned with the lives of believers (their Christian walk). And for that reason, it is very much a book for us today. James calls us to live a life of faith that is genuine and consistent with our identity as followers of Jesus—a robust, resilient, living faith, characterised by love in action, good works and the evidence of a Godly character. In effect, it is an impossible life. Impossible but for:

- Christ’s victory over sin and death on our behalf; and
- the indwelling of God’s Spirit who sustains us in grace and leads us in the way of sanctification.

It is this life—the practical outworking of our faith—that is the theme of James.

In today’s passage we will focus in on ‘patience in suffering’.

Before the reading however, I want you to briefly reflect on the past 12 months, the personal and communal experience of living through the covid-19 pandemic. I’m interested particularly in its impact on you as a Christian, as believers... have the events of 2020 challenged your faith in any way, perhaps it’s shaken your faith, or has your faith in God been a sure source of comfort and strength throughout?

Because Covid really has been the great disruptor hasn't it? Our work, our worship, our families, our social lives, our leisure ... they've all been impacted. And there's no denying the significant toll that this pandemic continues to exact (all over the world). So, 'what have you learned about yourself and your walk with Jesus in these unprecedented times?'

For me (and really in many ways I'm preaching to myself this morning ... you're welcome to listen in) there have been some spiritual red flags of late. An abiding impatience that has crept into my life, I've experienced frequent moments of frustrated, inner-anger at the lack of progress with things, I've felt irritation with others, anxiousness, an inability to properly rest and relax, and tellingly, a reluctance to savour prayer and meditate on God's goodness. Somehow, I've become unsettled ... and just maybe some of you have felt unsettled also.

To this predicament, James has something important to say:

(James 5:7–11)

<sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. <sup>9</sup> Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. <sup>10</sup> As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

<sup>11</sup> 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.

Our modern culture is a culture of great impatience. As a society we've become addicted to the heady promise of constant advancement and instant gratification—we want more of

everything and we want it on demand 24/7 ... fast food, fast phones, fast loans, Afterpay, Uber, binge TV ... the world says waiting shouldn't have to happen to anyone ... we now have premarital sex, divorce, we even have assisted dying ... because inconvenience and suffering is anathema—to be avoided at all costs, not endured and certainly not embraced. But there is a terrible spiritual price to pay for this relentless pursuit, it alienates us from God and destroys our well-being.

Christians aren't immune, today James reveals to us that the real agenda of our lives is set by the Sovereign Lord (not the world)—our worth and our purpose is to be found in the service of Christ alone.

Chapter 4, verse 13–16:

<sup>13</sup> Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”—<sup>14</sup> yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. (*that seems written for covid doesn't it?*) What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. <sup>15</sup> Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” <sup>16</sup> As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

We've learned in Hebrews, Job and again last week in 1 Peter, that God uses trials to confront us about who we are in Christ ... to test the mettle of our faith and to establish in us a close, loving dependence on Him in all circumstances. When I reflect on this I realise that I've been labouring under the illusion of control, drawing significance from being busy, productive, doing stuff, constantly striving and pressing forward ... a product of our culture, but God has shown me through these Covid times that I am not in control, He is. I've been guilty of the very arrogance that James has just identified. But in today's scripture there is both encouragement and instruction for change.

James offers us six practical perspectives (helps) that enable believers to patiently endure trials with our focus firmly fixed on the Lord. We are to:

1. anticipate the Lord's coming,
2. recognise the Lord's judgment,
3. follow the Lord's servants,
4. understand the Lord's blessing,
5. realise the Lord's purpose, and
6. consider the Lord's character.

As we unpack these, we will see that patience is the righteous standard that God expects all believers to adopt no matter what they are going through. Patient endurance is the attitude of genuine faith and as we learned last week, it is more precious than gold and brings God great glory. So firstly, believers should:

## **1. Anticipate the Lord's coming**

<sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.

---

James' audience understood farming, they knew the importance of the rains just as we do here in drought afflicted Australia. In the Middle East, the early rains fall during planting season in October-November and the late rains arrive just before harvest time in March-April. So, for 6 or 7 months the farmer is completely dependent on the weather. The success of his crops and all that precious produce hangs on the hope of sufficient and timely rainfall. James encourages us to endure like the farmer, waiting patiently in faith through life's trials for the showers of blessing that will come. Three times in this passage James refers to the

believer's great hope, the second coming of Christ. This gives important context to our waiting, for if we love the Lord and know Him as Saviour, then His promised return is our greatest motivation to endure. He is our certain reward. Paul wrote in Rom. 8:18, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us".

Note the language of immediacy, "the coming of the Lord is at hand" ... Jesus is coming quickly just as promised in Rev 22:20. We are to live as though the Lord is coming today. Consequently, James exhorts us to 'establish' our hearts: this is the same word used in Luke 9:51 to describe Jesus' resolute determination to go to Jerusalem although He knew He was approaching His own death. We must adopt our own resolute determination to stay the course no matter the difficulty because Jesus will return. Our trials are temporary, but His reward is forever.

Secondly, to encourage us in patience we need to:

## **2. Recognise the Lord's judgement**

<sup>9</sup> Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door.

---

The second coming is a source of comfort to believers undergoing trial because there will be an end to suffering as we have just seen, but James also reminds us that we do well to remember that Christ is coming in judgement. In verse 9, Jesus is the Judge standing ready at the door. We know that as believers, our sins have been taken care of in Christ at the cross and our salvation is assured, but we will be called to account for the Christian life that we lead. Difficult circumstances in our lives, particularly over extended periods of time, can cause us to become frustrated and even bitter, they can cause us to complain against one

another. I think we've seen some of this in evidence in the public square during the lockdown haven't we. Although all society is suffering, there has been constant questioning, bickering and selfishness on display—individuals, groups, even the authorities, have turned against each other at times of fearful stress. James cautions us against falling into this type of coping behaviour. Guard yourselves, do not grumble against one another. Knowing that Christ will return in judgment should produce patience in us because for those who persevere, the Master has words of commendation (Matt 25:21) “Well done good and faithful servant”.

It is the servants who proved faithful in the past who are the focus of James third point. We should follow them:

### **3. Follow the Lord's servants**

<sup>10</sup> As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. <sup>11</sup> Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast.

---

James' letter is addressed to the 12 tribes in the Dispersion and so it is likely many of his readers were Jewish Christians who had fled because of persecution and were still facing trials because of their faith. His readers were well acquainted with the history of Israel's prophets—a history of rejection and unjust suffering: Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Ezekial, and many more, we could add all the heroes of the faith listed in Hebrews 11 that we recently went through with Pastor David... each one stands as an exemplar of patience under trial. They remained steadfast in the Lord until the end of their lives and were considered blessed for it. Their reward was in heaven and the testimony of their faith is enshrined in scripture forever. We are to look to them, the Lord's servants, as inspiration for strength to endure. In so doing we will be able to stand with Paul in 2 Cor 12:10 and say “For the sake of Christ,

then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Fourthly, James encourages us to:

#### **4. Understand the Lord’s blessing**

Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast.

---

If the prophets are models of faithfulness under duress, how much more so Job who endured such unimaginable suffering and grief. Though he struggled to understand what God was doing, though he cried out in great anguish and confusion, we are told that ‘he did not sin nor did he blame God’. The ending of the book of Job is so memorable because the physical and material blessings that he receives as a result of his steadfast endurance is twice that of what he had before. But we take heart in the real blessing from Job’s story and that is that God is revealed as having never departed from Job. Through the entire ordeal—He always had Job in sight, lovingly upholding him in His righteous right hand. So, God is ever faithful, and James wants us to be confident that God’s great blessing, particularly His presence, is promised to all those who endure in faith—now and in the future glory.

Our fifth encouragement is to:

#### **5. Realise the Lord’s purpose**

You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

---

What exactly was the purpose of Job’s suffering? We know that Job’s trials began as a test of his faith because Satan wanted to destroy that faith by making him suffer, suspecting that Job

would reject God. But despite being reduced to little more than a shadow of his former self, Job's trust in God is proved genuine and his faith is ultimately strengthened as a result. By persevering, Job comes to see God more clearly. And this is what James wants us to grasp. The Lord's purpose in allowing trials in our lives is to strengthen us, to perfect us, as well as to usher us into richer blessings and a fuller revelation of Himself.

And to know Him is the goal of our final encouragement. We should:

## **6. Consider the Lord's character**

... how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

---

At the height of his suffering when Job was ready to die, he questioned whether God really cared about him. To suspect God's goodness in this way has been the natural human response to fear and pain since the fall in the garden of Eden ... 'If God really loves me how could He let this happen'. But this is a thought that originates with the evil one. By contrast, the response of faith has its foundation in the indisputable record of the Old Testament that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful. James underlines all that he has said to this point with this final truth that has the power to transform every aspect of our lives, especially our suffering. In all circumstances, at all times, our Heavenly Father cares for us because He is compassionate and merciful.

Be patient, therefore, brothers ... by anticipating the Lord's coming, by recognising the Lord's judgment, by following the example set by the Lord's faithful servants, by understanding the Lord's blessing, by realising the Lord's purpose, and by considering the Lord's caring character.

"Weeping may last for the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning".

---