

SERIES: Walk the Talk

SERMON: **Lord, Give me Patience—Now!**

SCRIPTURE: James 5:7-11

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Last Sunday James offered us a “word to the wealthy,” rebuking the wicked who misuse riches in flagrant disregard of godly principles of stewardship. Pastor Phil did a really good job sharing that theme with us. Today our Scripture passage considers the other side of the coin: what about those who get the short end of the stick—the poor, the downtrodden and the suffering?

There is a theological movement that has developed in many liberal denominations over the past 40 years called “Liberation Theology.” It gained a lot of attention recently because of Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Barack Obama’s former pastor. The primary premise of liberation theology is that God is on the side of the oppressed masses, and they need to rise up and claim their inheritance, through protest, and even revolution if necessary.

Now that idea might seem to be the natural outcome of last week’s passage, James 5:1-6. After all, if the wicked rich have lived in luxury and self-indulgence, if they have failed to pay the workmen, if the cries of the oppressed have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty, and if the rich have condemned and even murdered the innocent, then surely God's solution must be to bring judgment upon them. And who is better suited to be His instruments of judgment than those they have oppressed?

Sounds logical, doesn't it? The only problem is, that's not God's solution. Instead, the oppressed are to take quite a different approach, according to James 5:7-11:

*Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!*

*Brothers, 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 consider 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.*

Not only is revolution *not* the answer for the oppressed; they are not even to grumble against those mistreating them. Wow! I suspect Jeremiah Wright would respond, “Easy for you to say, Whitey!” And more than likely he would add under his breath, “And besides, who cares what James thinks?” The leaders of the denomination to which he belongs haven’t cared what the Bible says for decades. But those of us who believe in the authority of Scripture need to give James our ears and consider his solution, which is really God’s solution.

When we come to any passage of Scripture, one of the first questions we need to ask is, “Who is being addressed?” Phil helped us understand that the first six verses of chapter 5 were directed at the wicked rich, not his fellow-believers, though the passage certainly has application to all of us.

But our passage this morning, beginning in verse 7, is clearly addressed to believers, for he calls them “brothers.” We may feel that this word to the poor, the disenfranchised, and the suffering may not fit us very well, but one doesn't have to be at the bottom on the ladder of society to find instruction and comfort in this passage. While perhaps no one here today has experienced as much oppression as James' listeners or Christians in North Korea or Sudan, there are certainly some here this morning who are unemployed, some trapped in destructive relationships, some who have been ridiculed for your faith, others plagued by emotional instability, and still others subject to any number of trials and tribulations. If you're in any kind of trouble this morning, this is for you. You need patience.

Of course, we all want patience; every one of us recognizes it as a virtue. But we Americans are in such a hurry that we want whatever we want now! Friends, “patience now” is an oxymoron, i.e., it's a self-contradictory combination of words. In fact, the Scriptures teach us that patience is a product of tribulation (remember, “tribulation works patience”), so when we ask for patience we may be asking for something we really don't want; at least we don't want what often must come first. But we're going to get it, tribulation that is, whether we want it or not, so we might as well learn patience from it.

I will make a confession this morning: I am not what one would call a patient driver. I have a really hard time dealing with people who are just out cruising leisurely, taking up space on the road when I'm heading somewhere important. I fantasize about having a bazooka mounted on my hood with a remote control in my hand. I'm not proud of that—just trying to be honest. My wife has this little children's song about a snail she starts singing when I start aiming my bazooka:

*Have patience, have patience,  
Don't be in such a hurry.  
When you get impatient you only start to worry.  
Remember, remember that God is patient too  
And think of all the times when others have to wait for you.*

I hate that song, but it actually has a great message—for drivers, as well as for those undergoing any kind of trial.

Now we're going to examine three things today:

The believer's responsibilities in times of trouble,  
The believer's examples in times of trouble,  
And the believer's principles in times of trouble. First, . . .

### **The believer's responsibilities in times of trouble**

Three responsibilities are mentioned; the first of which is the very thing we've been talking about:

**1. Patience. “Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming.”** The word “then” or “therefore” introducing this paragraph ties it in with the preceding passage in a very important

way. It is because the cries of the poor have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty and it is because the rich are certainly going to be judged for their unfairness, that patience can be urged. If God didn't care or if He was too weak to work in your behalf then taking things into our own hands might make sense. Fighting for your cause and trying to destroy those who are oppressing you might be the only solution. But since God is both concerned and all-powerful, patience makes sense.

But how long should the troubled person be patient? The passage tells us clearly: "until the Lord's coming." Three times in these first three verses the Second Coming of Christ is alluded to. This is a central factor in New Testament ethics—Christian behavior must be tempered by the knowledge that unfairness and persecution and prejudice will not be entirely eliminated from society *until* the King of righteousness returns.

Does such a perspective demand a totally pacifistic attitude toward aggression and injustice? No, I don't think so. In the first place, James is not offering us political principles to govern international relationships between countries at war or social principles to decide whether we can defend ourselves in court. He is offering spiritual principles for interpersonal relations between believers and their oppressors. It may have some application to political or judicial issues, but that is not the primary focus of our passage.

The Apostle Paul, you will recall, was not a pacifist when it came to injustice. He used the Roman legal system to defend himself against false charges, appealing his case all the way to Caesar. But Paul never gave the impression that his destiny depended upon the courts. His ultimate trust was clearly in God. In other words, patience does not preclude taking action, even self-defense; it does preclude fretting, anger, violence, or despair.

Now a second responsibility of the believer in time of trouble is revealed by the term "stand firm," mentioned in verse 8.

**2. Steadfastness. "You too be patient and stand firm."** The Greek literally reads, "strengthen your hearts." God's purpose when He allows trouble in your life is not to see you squirm, but to produce strength and maturity in you. Basic training in the U.S. army, which is challenging and very difficult, serves one purpose—to take a civilian who is ignorant and inadequate in the ways of war and instill in him the discipline of military life. Without the trials of basic training, the civilian would never become a mature soldier. Likewise we need to realize that God allows trials to produce spiritual maturity and steadfastness in us.

Friends, one of the things that happens when we lack patience and steadfastness is that we start grumbling against those we blame for our trials. That's why James adds in verse 9, "Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The judge is standing at the door!" We already dealt with judgment rather extensively in chapter 4, so all we will say at this time is that we need regular reminders not to condemn others, no matter how much we suffer. God is not unaware of what we're enduring; in fact, He's standing right at the door ready to act in our behalf!

**3. Endurance or perseverance.** “As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered.” The term “perseverance” or “endurance” is closely related to the previous word “patience”, but whereas patience is a quality we should have with people, endurance is what we need with circumstances. And clearly some people have a lot more to endure than others. Back in the early 90's one of our church planters in rural St. Louis County was a man named Ron Daves. I remember when his father died at the young age of 59. I felt a lot of sympathy for Ron, but then I learned that some years before Ron's 21 year-old brother had died in a car accident. A couple of years later his 17 year-old brother died in another car accident. And then his kid brother, 13 years old, fell off a cliff and died.

Patience with people is not what Ron and his family needed because these accidents were no one's fault. But patience through difficult circumstances was sure needed. Frankly, those circumstances seemed almost overwhelming, but I think one thing God accomplished through all that pain was to produce in Ron a gentleness and compassion that the ordinary pastor has little capacity for.

So far James has indicated that the believer has three responsibilities in times of trouble: patience, steadfastness, and endurance. And to illustrate those three qualities he offers us three examples, the first of which is the farmer.

### **The believer's examples in times of trouble**

#### **1. The farmer illustrates patience and steadfastness in respect to God's timing (7).**

Verse 7: “See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains.” If a person is impatient he'd better not become a farmer. It is definitely not the career for Type-A personalities. The farmer has to wait, and then wait some more—for the early rains to soften the ground, for the seeds to sprout, for the latter rains to produce growth, and finally for the crops to mature. He can't control the weather and he can't hurry the process.

This doesn't mean, of course, that the farmer stands around doing nothing. Rather, he is constantly at work—watering, weeding, and fertilizing. But he knows that the harvest and its timing is ultimately in the hands of God. So also believers must wait patiently for the Lord to deliver them from their trouble. “In due season”, writes Paul in Gal. 6:9, “we shall reap if we do not faint.”

**2. The prophets illustrate patience in the face of suffering (10).** Though James doesn't mention any prophet in particular, he does refer to them as those “who spoke in the name of the Lord,” undoubtedly a reference to the OT prophets as a group. Back up a few pages in your Bible to the 11th chapter of Hebrews, where I'll begin reading in verse 32 through verse 40:

*And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of*

*lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.*

*These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.*

Have you suffered any more than these prophets? Of course not. They exercised patience in the face of terrible trials. They didn't fight back, they didn't insist on defending themselves, they didn't become bitter at God, and they didn't adopt liberation theology and rail against those responsible for their suffering. Instead they kept speaking the word of God.

Like the farmer we should keep working; and like the prophets we should keep witnessing, no matter how trying our circumstances may be.

**3. Job illustrates patience and perseverance in the face of overwhelming trials.** “As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord *finally* brought about.” Everyone knows that Job was a man who suffered greatly, but not everyone knows why he suffered. He did not suffer because he was so sinful—he suffered because he was so righteous.

Satan one day had an audience with God, at which time God bragged about his servant Job. But Satan scoffed, alleging that the only reason Job feared God is because God had put a hedge of protection around him and his household and everything he owned. Job was so rich and happy, why wouldn't he trust God? Well, God didn't deny the existence of a hedge, but He did deny that it had anything to do with Job's faith. To prove the point God gave Satan the right to remove the hedge and attack Job's family and possessions, and later even his health.

Now it's very important to recognize that Job knew nothing about the reason for his miserable change of fortune. In fact, there is no indication that he ever learned that his incredible suffering was due to a debate of sorts taking place in Heaven. But even though he didn't understand the cause of his trouble, he still persevered. I'm frankly glad James uses Job as an example, because his perseverance was not perfect, just as mine is not. At times he complained about God's treatment of him; he struggled and questioned. But he never abandoned his trust in God, and even in the midst of his confusion, the flame of faith was never extinguished in his heart. That's the kind of perseverance and endurance I can relate to.

We are not without examples in our own day, of course—people like Corrie ten Boom, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Gracia Burnham.

So far we have seen three responsibilities of the believer in times of trouble. We have also been given three examples for the believer in times of trouble. Finally, our text offers us three principles for times of trouble.

### **The believer's principles in times of trouble**

**1. The Lord is coming, so don't give up.** There is a strong tendency for those under a pile to want to give up. We can bang our head against the wall just so many times before we begin to ask, "Why am I doing this? How many times, Lord, do I go back to that job and suffer abuse for the pittance I make? How many times, Lord, do I have to put up with the lousy attitude of my spouse? How many times, Lord, do I have to be rejected by other children at school? How many times, Lord?"

The answer: "Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming." I don't think this means we're necessarily going to have to wait until the Second Coming before finding relief. What is being called for here is an attitude of patience and perseverance in view of the Second Coming. The Second Coming is that great event in history when all wrongs will be made right, all miscarriages of justice will be straightened out, all inequities will be corrected. If we didn't know that such a day is coming, we would probably be tempted to give up. But since we know the Lord is coming we don't have to. We can afford to be both patient and steadfast and we can practice endurance, because when He comes there will be rewards and blessings for those who are ready.

**2. The Lord will judge, so don't take things into your own hands.** A second tendency when troubles pile up, besides giving up, is fighting back. Rev. Jeremiah Wright lashed out viciously toward those whom he felt were responsible for the plight of black Americans. We too can sometimes get angry at those we hold responsible for our being laid off, or for our child being denied playing time on the baseball team at school, or for medical malpractice that has victimized us.

Instead, says James, we need to recognize that the Judge is fully aware of the situation and is able to defend us and protect our rights. Listen to 2 Thes. 1:3-10.

*We ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing. Therefore, among God's churches we boast about your perseverance and faith in all the persecutions and trials you are enduring.*

*All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to*

*be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.*

The indication from Scripture is that if we choose to handle injustice ourselves, God may well let us. Or we can allow Him to handle it. He's much more skilled at it.

**3. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, so don't doubt Him.** When Job's wife experienced some of the same losses Job suffered and then, in addition, saw him face terrible physical ailments to boot, she urged him to "curse God and commit suicide." Job refused, and because he persevered he was able to experience "what the Lord *finally* brought about." That little word "finally" in verse 11 is crucial. It took a long time before God brought the good from the ashes. But eventually Job saw the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

Our passage ends with this statement: "The Lord is full of compassion and mercy" (end of verse 11). Sometimes we have to take that by faith. I grant there are times when His compassion and mercy are fairly well hidden by circumstances or by irregular people we have to deal with. The prophets couldn't always see God's compassion and mercy. Nor could Job. They had to accept it by faith. They did, and they did not regret it.

**Conclusion:** The word to the wealthy last Sunday was this: don't abuse the riches God has given you by hoarding them, using them self-indulgently, or withholding them from others. The word to the troubled today is: don't give up, don't take things into your own hands, and don't doubt God's love.

Woodrow Wilson once said, "I would rather fail in a cause that will someday triumph than to triumph in a cause that someday will fail." I think that sums up the thrust of James 5:1-12. The wicked rich have largely succeeded in a cause that will one day fail. The suffering believer (5:6-11) has failed, at least as the world views him, in a cause that will someday triumph.

I'm going to close with Psalm 37:1-13. Notice particularly the three-fold repetition of the phrase, "Do not fret."

*Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong;  
for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away.*

*Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.*

*Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart.*

*Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this:*

*He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.*

*Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; do not fret when men succeed in*

*their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes.*

*Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret it leads only to evil.*

*For evil men will be cut off, but those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land.*

*A little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look for them, they will not be found.*

*But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace.*

*The wicked plot against the righteous and gnash their teeth at them;  
but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he knows their day is coming.*

Let's have a moment of silent prayer as we commit our particular troubles to a faithful God.