

LONG STRONG CHRISTIANS

James 5:7-11

Sermon for Peace Church

July 19, 2009

PURPOSE – To cultivate strength & endurance in Christian living, focusing on the return of Christ and the sovereign work of God.

MAIN IDEA – Because Christ is coming again, continue patiently and steadfastly in the vision of godliness given to you.

I. INTRODUCTION

Let's open our Bibles to James 5:7 (p. 1885)

1. We're nearing the end of our journey through this letter - written by James, the half-brother of Jesus Christ.

... known in church history as "James the Just" because of his righteous life.

... and as "Camel-Knees James" – because of his prayer life – the title being a reference to the calluses on the knees of camels from their kneeling.

(i) James was the leader of the Church in Jerusalem, following the Day of Pentecost. It was to him that Paul was brought after he was converted. It was James who spoke decidedly when issues first arose from non-Jewish Christians joining the Church.

He is a MUCH-RESPECTED father of the church, martyred in 62 A.D. by stoning.

"Santiago" is Spanish for the name, St. James

2. So we have tracked CLOSELY his line of thought through this letter, seeking to gain his vision for the Christian life & community.

This has been an expositional series of sermons, more than a topical series. I've sought to "expose" his Spirit-given thoughts and lines of reasoning. These have been sermons to listen to with your Bible open, following that line of thought.

3. Today's passage in our pew Bibles is titled, "Patience in Suffering".

As we've seen, James' vision for Christians is not that they be volatile, verbose & reactive but patient & steadfast through life.

"Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, - ch. 1:12 - because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him."

- That's really the THEME VERSE of the whole letter

(i) Those words – patience (literally, “long suffering”), standing firm, perseverance – come up again in this morning's passage. Let's receive God's Word.

Read James 5:7-11

II. THE CONTEXT & CHALLENGE

1. The context for this call to patience & perseverance is SUFFERING.

And to help us enter these words, it's worth noting at the outset that there are different TYPES OF SUFFERING that come our way in this age:

(i) Some suffering comes because humans sin against humans! Man is “inhumane” to man.

That's the immediate context of this passage – wealthy landowners were oppressing their workers, some of whom were in the church. They weren't paying just wages. They were abusing, even murdering the vulnerable poor for the sake of increasing their wealth.

Abuse, gossip, stealing – other people hurt us, neglect us, treat us unfairly ... it leads to suffering. A child disrespects a parent – that hurts. A parent breaks a promise to a child – that hurts.

(ii) Another type of suffering comes from the brokenness of this world – natural disasters, sickness, accidents.

- I.e. – the Rasmussens losing their parents and one child in a train-auto collision this week – so painful.

(iii) A third type of suffering can be called the suffering of the “Cross” – this is the suffering that comes when you battle against sin – in this world, in your life.

I.e. – The boss tells you to organize the company party at the casino. You say, “I can't do that – I don't believe in supporting gambling”. He says, “You do this or else ...” You choose the “or else” ... leading to discrimination, no more promotions, maybe even job loss.

The suffering of the Cross is suffering to overcome sin. = Suffering for good / right / truth / God. That's what Paul calls "the fellowship of Jesus' sufferings". He went through it frequently in spreading the gospel – being imprisoned & beaten.

A. Even personally, when you realize that, in order to overcome a sin in your life / family / church, you need to act courageously, way outside your comfort zone. That voluntary suffering is the suffering of the Cross.

(iv) Then there's a 4th type of suffering that comes is simply the result of our own FOOLISHNESS / our SIN.

I.e. – It's like this: If you walk off the roof of this church, fall to the ground and break your leg – you're suffering from your own folly. You're ignoring God's law of gravity – and pay the price.

God too has set moral laws into this creation. You break laws of faithfulness, truthfulness, honesty, you will pay the price. You neglect your wife & children, they separate from you – that's your own folly.

You cut corners at work; you mistreat friends; you neglect to Sabbath ... suffering will come. You will be isolated, unemployed and burnt out – it will be painful!

A. Much suffering comes from this source – and admittedly these 4 different types aren't all neatly separate from one another.

2. But here's the reason for distinguishing these types of suffering: EXCEPT FOR THIS LAST CATEGORY (personal folly) – for which the Bible calls us to REPENT, James here counsels us to be patient & persevering in the context of suffering!

Verse 10 – *"Be patient in the face of suffering."*

Verse 11 – *"As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered in the face of suffering."*

(i) What James DOES NOT MEAN by this call to patience is just being NICE / TOLERANT / ACCEPTING ... a DOOR MAT! (We sometimes equate patience with acceptance)

Biblical patience is more than that. Like the injustice of the rich oppressing the poor - we shouldn't just "accept" that! The Word calls us to address that! James himself is hardly a model of patience in the blunt ways he's challenged his readers through this letter!

(ii) Instead, what James is getting at is the MANNER we address the issues of suffering & change:

“Be persevering & patient” because there are no quick solutions to issues of suffering, especially in broader systems – like the family, church, society.

STICK-TO-ITIVENESS – is what he’s counseling. Slow & steady wins the race. He’s cautioning us against looking for quick-fixes in our life or church or society.

A. Even in overcoming the sins of the heart – lusts / angers / fears / prides (and all the pain they bring), it takes:

Patience / Standing Firm – means “heart-established” – establish that vision of what godliness looks like ...

... and then Perseverance – enduring under trial.

(iii) Douglas Webster writes, *“The purpose of patient endurance is to guard the Christian from either giving in to the world or attacking the world. Apathy and anger are both wrong ... Patient endurance is a holy challenge to stick to the principles of the gospel. Patience is not passivity ... It is the will to stay on course, to pursue righteousness in spite of evil and to persevere for the sake of Christ.”*

Then he gives some examples. This is relevant for:

- Christians fighting racism in the United States
- Believers in medical research expected to experiment with fetal tissue
- Christians in business who are told to make career their number one priority
- High-school & college students tempted to give up their sexual purity

... TAKES PATIENCE & PERSEVERANCE

- I might add churches attempting to rebuild to become ethnically-diverse & community oriented. Peace Church’s call takes much patience & perseverance – there’s no quick fix to it!

3. So how do we do it? How do we become “long / strong” Christians, as the sermon’s titled? Before we answer that, notice verse 9 – a very IMPORTANT OBSERVATION

(i) James writes, *“DON’T GRUMBLE AGAINST EACH OTHER, brothers, or you will be judged!”*

At first, this statement seems out of place!

WHY, if unbelieving wealthy landowners are oppressing poor workers in the church, would people grumble against each other! ... WHY? ... cause it happens!

A. It's what we're even inclined to do! When suffering comes, we take it out on one another – those closest to us – even if they have nothing to do with the suffering!

I.e. – Tough day at work ... who gets the brunt of it? Family, later that day!

Difficult marriage? Credit-card stress? ... church gets complained about!

B. One commentator writes: *“Suffering can become fertile ground for fellow Christians to express discontent, even disdain for each other. This happens for a couple of reasons:*

First, many mistakenly believe that the church exists only to meet their needs. They have a misguided and self-centered notion of the church. They expect more from the church than their brothers & sisters can possibly fulfill – like the Pharisees who burdened others with impossible demands, but never lifted a finger to help.

And second, Christians see the church as a scapegoat for their own disobedience and spiritual apathy. They are impatient with their own lack of spiritual growth & see the church as an easy excuse. It's too painful for them to take responsibility for their own immaturity. Instead of acknowledging their sin and receiving forgiveness, they grow bitter & critical.”

(ii) In the context of suffering, James writes “DON'T GRUMBLE AGAINST EACH OTHER”!

Satan ever seeks to divide the church. That's the temptation we face & the challenge we must overcome through patient perseverance.

III. HOW TO GROW LONG & STRONG

HOW? James gives 2 main resources, and hints at a 3rd.

1. First, the DAY OF JESUS' RETURN.

Verse 7 – In the context of your suffering, be patient & persevering until the Lord's coming.

(i) He will come again, personally. All of our hopes are tied to that Day. We shall see Him face to face. This age and its suffering will end. He will return in glory & trumpet sound – all eyes shall behold Him. He will bring this age to its CULMINATION & transition to the next!

A. How do we know he'll come again? Because He said so ... and because He rose from the dead. His resurrection is the guarantee, even the first-fruits of that return.

No resurrection = no guarantee ... But if He is risen! ...

(ii) So we patiently persevere by making that day the focal point of our existence. As Chuck Swindoll states:

Don't focus on the situation (of suffering), or you'll become angry.

Don't focus on yourself, or you'll become filled with self-pity.

Don't focus on someone to blame, or you'll begin complaining.

Don't focus on the present, or you'll miss the point of what God is wishing to achieve in your life.

In order to persevere patiently through this age, focus on the coming again of the Lord Jesus Christ! Orient your life to that Day.

(iii) James gives 2 descriptions of it:

A. One, it'll be a DAY OF JUDGMENT.

V. 9 – *Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!*

The Day of Jesus' Return is the Day when right will be made right, wrong declared wrong – judged & banished! And each & every one of us will be subject to this scrutiny.

... SO GROW TOWARD THE RIGHT! Become a person of substance in that day.

(a) 1Corinthians 3 describes it as a DAY OF BURNING – a cleansing fire – anything that is not of Christ – true to Him, born in Him – will be purged by fire.

- Only that which is built on the foundation of Christ Jesus will last ... Divisive complaining against one another on that day will be BURNED AWAY. And if that's essentially who you are, you will be burned away. For God's people will live in complete harmony.

- So persevere for that day – and be rid of falsehood.

B. Second, it'll be a day of LONGINGS FULFILLED.

V. 7 – James compares the Christian life to farming: *"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 & stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near."*

(b) A farmer sows seeds into the ground – and so do we. The seeds that we sow are the seeds of the future. We see on the Day of Jesus' Return a kingdom of justice, shalom, unity, well-being, righteousness, glory to God.

- And even in this age we bear witness to that belief by sowing seeds for it – the church gets involved in issues of racial harmony – because that’s the future of this earth. We work patiently & perseveringly with the poor – because we know there’ll be a day of provision to come!

Our work presently bears some signs toward it, but mainly we do it in ANTICIPATION of Jesus’ return.

That Day, which will come as sure as the autumn & spring rains, will be the fulfillment of your longings. In fact, that is the reward & shape of heaven on earth – the hopes that you have claimed & lived will be fulfilled upon Jesus’ return.

... like the farmer sowing his seeds of hope in the ground.

(iv) So we do not give up – because the essence of this age is SOWING.

So often we “sow in tears” (Ps. 126), trusting that we will “REAP WITH SONGS OF JOY”.

- If there was no suffering, we’d be inclined to live for this age and not the one that Jesus will usher in with His return.

BE PATIENT AND STAND FIRM BECAUSE THE LORD’S COMING IS NEAR
KEEP YOUR FOCUS ON THAT DAY!

2. The second resource that James draws our attention to is the fellowship of the saints.

We cannot persevere alone. We need the help & witness of others – past and present.

(i) Verse 10 – James goes back to the prophets – who spoke in the name of the Lord – Jeremiah / Daniel / Elijah – you’d hardly think of them as patient people, but James is referring to that patience that “keeps at it” – even being thrown into stockades or lion’s dens.

- Don’t give up. They didn’t!

(ii) Verse 11 – he lifts before us the example of JOB.

What a blessing it is to read Scripture. We must keep in touch with this Book! (Fall)

JOB – loses his possessions, his children, his health

- “Curse God & die”, says his wife.
- “No! The Lord gave. The Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

A. He persevered and eventually, even in this age, the Lord restored him beyond what he had before. We receive this witness in anticipation of the Great Restoration at Jesus’ return.

(iii) The witness of great saints in history helps us persevere.

I read this week about John Bunyan, author of Pilgrim's Progress – spent 12 years in jail because he preached without the required license from the religious authorities. If he had promised to stop preaching, they would have let him out of jail.

Bunyan had a wife and children, including a blind daughter. He said that when they would leave after visiting him in jail, it was like tearing his flesh from his bones to see them go. But, he refused to promise to stop preaching in order to secure his release!

READ CHRISTIAN BIOGRAPHY

(iv) Our fellowship is designed to help us patiently persevere!

That's why the Word says don't neglect meeting together ... and don't grumble against each other.

I experienced that this week serving communion to Hank Yonkman, frail but hopeful of surgery, with Elder Cliff – who himself persevered through West Nile disease.

THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE CHURCH – universal, historical, Biblical, local – helps us persevere.

Don't lost touch with that fellowship! Build it! - Share your struggles, invite prayer, receive witness – in order to patiently persevere. You can't do it alone, James reminds us.

3. The THIRD RESOURCE is GOD HIMSELF – who He is.

Last line – *The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.*

(i) We become LONG / STRONG CHRISTIANS through knowing a LONG / STRONG GOD.

- Do you know Him?

Can you see how patient & persevering He has been with you?

- If it were not for His mercy, I would not be here with you. My story would be over.

A. But his mercies are new every morning – great is his faithfulness.

“He is patient toward you” – 2 Peter 3:9 – not wishing for any to perish, but for all to come to repentance.”

IV. CONCLUSION

1. Eugene Peterson once wrote a book on the Psalms titled, "A Long Obedience in the Same Direction."

He actually borrowed that line from Friedrich Nietzsche who wrote, "The essential thing 'in heaven and earth' is...that there should be long obedience in the same direction; there thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living."

(i) A long obedience in the same direction – that's the Christian life, especially in the context of suffering.

A. The DIRECTION is the RIGHTEOUSNESS to be revealed at Jesus' return.

Don't lose that focus!

B. THE LONG OBEDIENCES comes from living together, with God's Word & people – calling upon the God who is long & strong ... FOR US!

AMEN!