

1 We've finally come to the end of the road in our read through James, but you know that this is really just the beginning. We don't get to read James and then file it away in the circular file of uncomfortable Scripture we'd rather not remember. James warns us that a faith in Christ and a community of believers gathered around that faith must necessarily bear the fruit of good works of love, mercy, and compassion, transforming our lives and the world by the Spirit and power of God.

The Book of James is a no-nonsense letter that doesn't mince words to spare our feelings, so we're bluntly warned to keep our mouths shut, unless we have something to say that brings Godly help and healing. We're cautioned that Godly behavior comes from cultivating a humble heart, acknowledging our total dependence on the love and grace of God. And as if that wasn't enough, we come today to one of the most difficult sections of James, as we're challenged to be patient in suffering, prayerful in relationship, and pursuing reconciliation with God with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

I'm reading now from the conclusion of the letter in James 5, beginning with verse 13 in the New Living Translation. **{Read James 5:13-20, NLT}**

2 It's easy to read the last chapter of James and come away with some confusion and misunderstandings about what James is meaning to say about prayer, healing, forgiveness, and the problem of suffering. We could spend another four weeks unpacking each of those, but we won't, at least not today. Let's start with our first reading, where we're called to be patient in suffering.

Listening to some preachers or well-meaning friends, and even reading other selections from the Bible, you might get the impression that human suffering is easily understood. It's not. Like so much in faith and life, our understanding of suffering is held in tension. We understand God's character as being good and loving, but we also see God's nature as being all powerful, all knowing, and present everywhere. Why would a loving, all-powerful God allow anyone to suffer? We've all suffered and know others who have suffered. Most of us know someone who is suffering right now, perhaps in ways that are unimaginable to us. Why does God allow that? Does God actually cause it?

I'm not going to try to answer that question for you today, but I do want to help you come to grips with the example James offers us of one who endured suffering patiently. Remember Job? He was that Old Testament figure who God allowed Satan to tempt by systematically stripping away his possessions, his family, and finally, his health. James rather easily excuses God's complicity in allowing Job to suffer, pointing out that God restored Job's health and wealth even more abundantly in the end. I can't move there quite so quickly or easily.

3 Friends, how many of you know that much suffering, perhaps most suffering, doesn't end that way, with God miraculously intervening and reversing all the ill that came with the suffering and rewarding us for our troubles? Suffering often ends with disability or death, bankruptcy, or relationships that are irreparably damaged. In the Bible, Job got his happy ending, but most of God's prophets didn't! Moses died in the wilderness, tackled by sin in the fourth down, a yard short of crossing into the Promised Land. Hebrews 11 includes a roll call of saints who lost their lives to violent persecution, including those who were sawn in two.¹ By the way, whatever you do, do not google that. You really don't want to see it illustrated. It's an image that's stilled burned into my brain.

I ask that you set aside your need to understand why we suffer for the moment, because what James is really trying to teach us is that when we do suffer- when, not if- we are called to do so patiently. And how are we to do that? It's more than a little surprising to me that James holds up Job as a patient sufferer. So much of the book is Job's monologue of complaint, insisting on his innocence and exclaiming his dismay that God would allow him to suffer. The pious speeches by Job's friends clearly didn't help, even though some of what they said was arguably true. What did eventually help Job was an encounter with God, in which he made: a fresh confession of God's sovereignty; an admission of his own ignorance; and a proclamation of repentance.² So perhaps patient suffering has less to do with being silent and complacent in our suffering, and more to do with actively turning to God in prayer and humbly remembering who we are in relation to God. If Job is to be our model for patient

¹ Hebrews 11:37

² Job 42:1-6

suffering, then patient suffering isn't a dishonest concealing of our anguish so much as it is an honest reckoning with God.

4 James goes on to exhort us to courage as we “wait for the Lord’s return.”³ Some believers have misunderstood arguments like this and have structured their entire faith and way of living around the hope of the imminent return of Jesus. Jesus is returning, and that should give us great and ultimate hope, but not only do we not know when that will be, Jesus made it abundantly clear that instead of sitting around speculating about what might happen tomorrow, we’re called to engage in this day with the fullness of who we are. Waiting for and praying for the Lord’s return can be a great source of comfort in the midst of suffering, but it was never meant to be our first order of business as followers of Jesus.

5 Let’s talk about prayer. You might get the impression from some bad teaching, bad examples, or a selective reading of the Scriptures that the primary purpose of prayer is to get God to dole out favors to us. It’s understandable if you believe that the coin needed to work this divine vending machine is faith, a sufficient quantity with which you’re guaranteed to get your selection. James is not helpful in this regard, lifting up the example of the Old Testament prophet Elijah, who ended a three-year draught through prayer. If Elijah could do that, we ought to as well, provided our faith is sufficient, right?

Wrong. Elijah was specifically called and anointed by God to be God’s prophet, and was given specific instructions regarding God’s plan for the drought. Praying for the end of the drought was God’s idea, not Elijah’s. But wait, didn’t Jesus say we could move mountains if we have enough faith?⁴ Yes, that’s true, provided God wants to move the mountain. The primary purpose of prayer is not to get God to pull the levers of the cosmos and make reality change, although as you yourselves can testify, God often does change the world in response to prayer. But when we don’t see God do that, it doesn’t mean we don’t have enough faith. Prayer is all about relationship. That’s the real reason we’re commanded to pray, as well as commanded to pray with and for other people. Prayer brings us into intimate relationship in the context and power of God’s Holy Spirit. It’s very significant that

³ James 5:8 New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

⁴ Mark 11:23

Job prayed for his friends and restored not only their standing with God but also their friendship with Job.

Prayer that seeks God and is submitted to God's will is blessed, regardless of any external outcomes. Sometimes we enjoy the privilege of seeing our prayers answered in this life. Sometimes we never do. There's so much that we don't know or see. But we're always changed when we come into God's presence, and our relationships with others are changed when prayer connects us with them through God's Spirit.

6 The last point of confusion we need to talk about is the connection of prayer, healing, confession, and forgiveness. James makes a clear connection between praying for healing from sickness, getting physically well, and having our sins forgiven: “[t]he Lord will make you well. And if you have committed any sins, you will be forgiven.”⁵ I'm going to go out on a limb here and guess that none of you ask for your sins to be forgiven when you visit your primary care physician. Yet in the ancient world, the physical and spiritual were seen as more interrelated than what we allow for today. Oil was used for wound treatment as well as for anointing Kings and Prophets, a sign of God's special favor. Jesus himself connected physical healing with spiritual forgiveness in his miraculous healing of the paralyzed man.⁶ Of course, Jesus also pointed out when he healed a blind man that not all sickness is caused by sin,⁷ something we certainly understand better in the twenty-first century. We see the same lesson in Job, where his suffering was brought about not as a result of his wrongdoing, but to glorify God.

7 Our modern ears are uncomfortable with the word “sin.” We usually prefer more vague terms like “lost” or “brokenness.” But at the core of the Gospel is the essential teaching that we all stand in need of forgiveness because of sin, the attitudes and actions that separate us from God and do violence to God's creation. We receive spiritual healing (i.e., reconciliation with God), when we confess our sin and turn away from it, choosing by faith to trust in and follow Jesus rather than ourselves.

⁵ James 5:15

⁶ Matthew 9:1-7

⁷ John 9:1-3

That's why these last verses in James really belong together. Prayer, confession, repentance, healing, and forgiveness all belong together in the Christian world view as means we use to seek and offer restoration under the sovereign rule and grace of God. And they all belong in community. The church exists to bring healing to a broken world, and we were created to do that together.

8 As we complete our study of James, it would be foolish and tragic for us to hear God's wisdom and then forget about it tomorrow. So today we have bookmarks for you with a prayer that we'll be using to remember to be both hearers and doers of God's word, and to do that together. Please pray it with me now, and at other times you find yourself gathered with family or friends in the faith. Let us pray.

Holy Spirit, as we meet you in prayer and praise, remind us that we belong to You and to each other.

9 *Break through our sinful habits and preferences to give us humble hearts that ache for others who are hurting physically, emotionally, or spiritually.*

10 *Make us doers of Your Word, in prayer and service to the world. Amen.*



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