

James 5:7-20
1 Kings 18
Psalm 85

“The Coming of the Lord”

March 18, 2018

Notice at the beginning of the passage that God has promised that he will send rain.

But then notice at the end of the passage that Elijah keeps praying.

He sends his servant to go look toward the sea.

He sends him back *seven times!*

He keeps praying until he sees the answer to his prayer!

You might say, “Why did he keep praying?”

God had promised that he would send rain –

why not just pray once and then *wait patiently* for God to answer?!

Patience must never be confused with *passivity*.

God calls us to be patient.

He does *not* call us to be passive!

What is the difference?

Endurance.

Steadfastness.

Persistence.

Trusting God that *he will do* what he has promised!

And therefore you will continue to pursue him in your prayers –

asking him to do what he has promised!

We see this in our Psalm of response – Psalm 85 –

a song that asks God to restore his land – as he has promised!

Sing Psalm 85

Read James 5:7-20

Throughout his letter,

James has spoken about what genuine faith looks like.

Genuine faith remains *steadfast* in the midst of trials –

because we *know* where these trials are going.

These trials will end with the coming of the Lord.

James introduced the idea of steadfastness back in chapter 1:

“the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.”

Now, at the end of his epistle, James returns to his opening theme,

but it is now enriched by his discussion of the *tongue* in chapter 3,

and how we speak in chapter 4.

James continues his theme of *speaking* here at the end of his epistle.

In the first section on steadfastness James focuses on the negative:

James warns against *grumbling* against one another –

similar to his warning against “speaking” against each other last time.

Then in the transition (verse 12) he urges us not to swear – but to let our yes be yes.

And in the second section, he focuses on the positive:

what sort of speaking *should* we do.

Pray, sing praise, confess your sin.

1. Steadfastness: The Eschatological Character of Faith (v7-12)

a. Be Patient, Therefore, Brothers Until the Coming of the Lord (v7a)

⁷ *Be patient, therefore, brothers,^[a] until the coming of the Lord.*

The “coming” of the Lord is an important theme in the NT.

The term “parousia” is used in Greek to refer to the coming of an important person (often a king or a royal official)

In the NT it is used regularly to refer to the various “comings” of our Lord – and especially his final coming in glory at the last day.

And that’s how James uses it as well.

Why should you endure trials with patience?

Because you are looking for the coming of the Lord.

Jesus is coming! [I don’t think you heard me?!]

b. The Example of the Farmer (v7b-8)

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. ⁸ You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.

The early and late rains were a common feature in Israel.

You need both the early rains and the late rains in order to have a good harvest.

But James is not just referring to a general agricultural principle

(after all, he is writing to the 12 tribes in the dispersion –

and outside of Palestine, the rain cycle might work differently).

The early and the late rains are connected to the coming of the Lord by the prophet Joel.

“Joel himself also draws an analogy between the two rains and the eschatological harvest.

James’ allusion to it thus reminds the readers that the Lord has indeed promised, in Scripture, to restore all things in righteousness.

Further, the mention of these eschatological ‘rains’

also puts in context the later mention of Elijah’s prayers

first stopping but then restoring the rains.” (McCartney, 241)

Be patient for the coming of the Lord is at hand – it is *near*.

This is the same word that Jesus uses when he says that the Kingdom of God is at hand.

Some may wonder – how can James say “near” when it was at least 2,000 years away!
But as Peter tells us, with God a thousand years are as a day –
and a day as a thousand years.

Why does he say “near”?

Because in terms of redemptive history, the coming of the Lord is the *next thing*.

Sunday evenings we have been going through the book of Daniel.

God had told the prophets that after the exile, he would restore Israel –
and the restoration of Israel would bring blessing to the nations.

In the book of Daniel, God explains to Daniel that it will be hundreds of years
before he actually fulfills what he had promised to the prophets.

If you read Jeremiah or Isaiah,

you might think that Messiah would come immediately after the exile.

You certainly wouldn't think that you would have to wait 500 years.

But God shows us his pattern through Daniel.

The fact that it is the *next thing* is what makes it *near*.

And the fact that the coming of the Lord is at hand –

the fact that it is *the next thing* in God's redemptive plan –

is what should help you to be *patient* in the midst of troubles.

God's judgment is coming.

The Day of the Lord – the Coming of the Lord – is at hand.

When you have the unshakeable confidence that *God is going to make things right*

you can live with *established hearts – strong hearts –*

standing firm in the faith, without wavering!

But judgment *begins* with the household of God.

It starts with us.

And that's the point of verse 9:

c. Do Not Grumble Against One Another, Brothers (v9)

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

Jesus had said *judge not* that you may not be judged.

But James says, *grumble not* that you may not be judged!

But when you think about it, it makes sense.

What is grumbling?

What are you doing when you moan and groan against someone else?

You are *judging them*.

You have passed judgment on them in your heart –

obviously there is no point in talking to *them* about this!

They are too far gone!
So you grumble against one another –
thereby tearing down your brother with your words.
David Powlison points out that this what we do when we get angry:
we appoint ourselves as prosecutor, judge, jury, and executioner –
and we condemn the other person without allowing them any defense –
and we declare our sentence before all the world!

So James tells us to beware of this attitude!

“Behold, the Judge is standing at the door.”
If you knew that you would be judged for every careless word...
would that change the way that you speak?

Well, Jesus says in Matthew 12:34-37,
“For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.
The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good,
and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil.
I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account
for every careless word they speak,
for by your words you will be justified,
and by your words you will be condemned.”

The Judge is standing at the door.
You will give an account for all your words!

So how *should you speak* as one who waits patiently for the coming of the Lord?
James gives us the example of the prophets:

d. The Example of the Prophets (v10-11a)

¹⁰ *As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.*

Remember that James is talking about how we *speak* as we wait for the coming of the Lord.
And he uses the prophets as examples of suffering and patience.

Peter and Paul will focus on how our suffering conforms us to the likeness of Christ.
That’s not really where James focuses our attention.

Rather, James is interested in the pattern of faith –
and particularly, what does faith look like when it is tested?
When you face adversity – when you face pressure in your life –
when you face doubt and unbelief –
what does *genuine faith* look like then?

Well, take a look at the prophets.

Consider those who spoke in the name of the Lord as examples of suffering and patience.

When you think of the prophets, how do you relate to them?

The prophets were not superhuman.

They were ordinary people – just like us.

James uses them to show how “ordinary people

who shared the common human experience of suffering

became extraordinary through their persevering faith

in the face of adversity.” (McCartney, 243)

When you think about it,

the prophets had *nothing* more special than you or I.

We are saved by grace – just like them.

They received the Holy Spirit – just like us.

After all, in the OT, the Holy Spirit was only poured on prophets, priests, and kings –

but at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out on all of God’s people

and so all of God’s people became prophets –

all of us have received power from on high

in order that we might declare the praises of him

who called us out of darkness into his glorious light –

that we might be a sort of firstfruits of the kingdom harvest.

¹¹ *Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast.*

“The blessedness of the prophets involves not their happiness in their earthly lives,

but their wholeness in relationship to God.” (McCartney, 243)

Consider the example of Job!

We would not say that Job was always *happy* –

he was rather miserable for quite a while!

But he was blessed.

And he was *steadfast*.

e. The Steadfastness of Job (v11b)

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

It is especially interesting to consider Job in the light of what James has been saying.

James has just said, “Do not grumble against one another, brothers.”

Now he says, “But be like Job.”

Many commentators are puzzled by the fact that James is called an example of steadfastness.

After all, Job regularly says that he is *complaining* against God –

and he insists that he cannot wait forever for God’s answer –

because he is mortal and is going to die.

This is why we need to distinguish between *complaining* and *grumbling*!
Grumbling is when you are moaning and groaning about something.
Grumbling is when you do not trust God –
you do not believe his promises –
and you are not coming to *him* with your problems!

Job does not grumble.

Job complains!

And furthermore, God himself declares at the end of the book
that Job is *right!!*

When Job says that God had painted a target on his back –
God says, “yup – that’s what I did!

I said to Satan, ‘Have you considered my servant Job?’”

When Job says that he did not deserve any of this –
God says, “yup, you’re right – you didn’t.”

Job is an excellent example of steadfastness and patience.

Because patience does *not* mean that you are *happy* with everything that happens!
Steadfastness does *not* mean that you never *complain*!

Patience is when you *still trust God* in the midst of the muck and the mess!

Steadfastness is when you still bring your complaint to God
even when you are certain that God is out to get you!!

And sometimes that may include some choice zingers!

Given that both God and James endorse the way that Job handles his situation,
let me give you some of my favorite quotes from Job!

When you are dealing with people who are less than helpful –
you can say these sorts of things (and *not* be grumbling against them!):

Job 13:4 – “As for you, you whitewash with lies;
worthless physicians are you all.

⁵ Oh that you would keep silent,
and it would be your wisdom!”

Or the best:

Job 12:2 – “No doubt you are the people, and wisdom will die with you!”

This is not *grumbling* – because there are times when sarcasm and rebuke are appropriate.

Job’s friends *deserved* sarcasm!

They deserved rebuke.

After all of their conversation, the LORD’s anger *burned against* Job’s friends –
and he said that they had not spoken rightly of him,
“as has my servant Job!”

But the point that James is making needs you to finish the sentence!

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

After all, think of what would have happened if Job had followed his wife's advice!

“Curse God and die.”

If Job had cursed God – well, then, we never would have heard of Job
(much less the steadfastness of Job!!).

In the middle of the story, Job did *not* see what God was doing.
But he trusted God and he brought his case to God –
and persevered in bringing his complaint to the LORD!

The whole point is that Job was steadfast – persevering *to the end*.

And you have seen the *end* – the telos – the purpose of the Lord –
not only in Job's life, but also in *every* story in scripture and in history!

You have seen the *end* – the purpose – the telos.

How the Lord is compassionate and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and mercy!

God's *purpose* is merciful.

Sometimes, when you are living in the middle of the book of Job,
it sure feels like God has a target strapped to your chest!

But remember the purpose of the Lord – how He is compassionate and merciful –
how the Day of the Lord is coming when he *will* make all things right.

Verse 12 then functions as a bridge, tying our two sections together:

f. Do Not Swear – But Let Your ‘Yes’ Be Yes (v12)

¹² *But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your “yes” be yes and your “no” be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.*

Part one deals with patience – part two with prayer.

What does not swearing oaths have to do with patience or with prayer?

Well, think about *why* someone is likely to swear an oath?

If you are getting impatient in a situation,
you may be more likely to swear an oath to try to hurry things up!

Think of when you were children on a playground:

when did you hear someone say, “swear to God, hope to die!”?

I heard that phrase countless times when I was a child –

almost *always* by someone who was either lying –

or getting frustrated by the situation, and hoped that “swearing an oath”
would hurry things up!

James says, no – don't do that!

You need to be true to your word.

You need to say what you mean,

and mean what you say.

Let your “yes” mean yes – and your “no” mean no.
And then leave it to God.
Trust *him*.

James is pretty much quoting Jesus from Matthew 5:34-37.

In the kingdom of God – in the family of Jesus –
you shouldn’t need an oath in order to trust each other.

“The people of God are, as the eschatological community,
called to exhibit the reality of the eschaton in their kingdom life,
and in the eschatological kingdom of God
everyone tells the truth and keeps promises.” (McCartney, 248-249)

So you should say what you mean and mean what you say.
So how should we speak?

That’s where James ends his epistle:
because prayer is *how God works* in this age.

2. Prayer: How God Works in This Age (v13-20)

a. Prayer and Praise: Calling on God in Bad Times and Good (v13)

¹³ *Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.*

Verse 13 starts with our words toward God.

Is anyone among you suffering?

Let him pray.

We heard of the suffering of Job – and how he called upon the Lord.

When you are suffering, pray like Job!!

How are you supposed to love God?

With *all* your heart – all your soul – all your mind – all your strength.

Is there anything left?

If you are supposed to love God with *everything*?

So what are you supposed to do with your suffering?

Love God with it.

“But Pastor, I’m depressed and anxious!”

That’s okay – God didn’t say, “love me with all your happy thoughts” –
he just said, love me *everything* you’ve got!

He’ll take it – whatever you’ve got! – the good, the bad, the ugly!

Just love *him*.

So is anyone among you suffering?

Let him pray.

Or is anyone cheerful?
Let him sing praise.

There is a time for songs of lament –
and a time for songs of joy!

The Christian life includes both!

But James assumes that the cheerful ones don't need quite as much encouragement,
so he quickly turns right back to the sufferers in verse 14:

b. The Prayer of Faith: Salvation for the Sick (v14-15)

¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

Because there are times when it is not enough for the sufferer to pray alone.

What do you in the midst of your afflictions –
when you know that you need help?!

Call for the elders – and let them pray – anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord.

Think back to Job.

His three friends came to comfort him.
How'd they do?
“Miserable comforters!!” (16:2)

So James does *not* say,

“Call for the elders and have them tell you where you screwed up!”

No, he says, call for the elders and let them pray over him.

What do we need when we are sick?

We need prayer.

(And the anointing with oil represents the fact that we are not just disembodied souls.

Yes, prayer *is* sufficient –

but the anointing with oil is a visible reminder of the anointing
that we have received in Christ.

That's why we keep a supply of olive oil in the church office,

in order to anoint with oil those who call for us to come and pray for them)

Verse 15 has confused many:

¹⁵ And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

What is this saying?

Well, if you just read it carefully, it's not that complicated!

James is very careful *not* to promise that the prayer of faith will *heal* the one who is sick.

The prayer of faith will *save* the one who is sick – and the Lord will raise him up.

Yes, God *may* heal you now.

But he *will* heal you in the resurrection – when he raises you up at the last day.

Remember Job.

And remember what God called him:

“my servant, Job.”

Job was a faithful *suffering* servant.

An *innocent* suffering servant.

In that way, Job was a picture of our Lord Jesus!

And you have seen the purpose of the Lord – how the Lord is compassionate and merciful

How the Lord delivered Job in the end –

How the Lord will deliver *you!* (because he first delivered Jesus!)

Also, notice how James does not fall into the trap of saying that if you are suffering it must be because you sinned.

Notice the “if” –

“*if* he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.”

Sometimes we suffer because of our sins.

If you're sleeping around, and you wind up with a sexually transmitted disease, then you are suffering because of your sin!

But not all disease comes through sin.

Many diseases and afflictions come *simply* because we live in a messed up world.

We malfunction – things around us malfunction –

and others malfunction –

with the result that we suffer.

So James simply says that *if* he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

But why does James feel the need to say it at all?!

Well, in the OT, the removal of sin and the removal of sickness are often connected.

Isaiah 33:24 says that when the LORD comes as judge, lawgiver, and king,

“no inhabitant will say, ‘I am sick’;

the people who dwell there will be forgiven their iniquity.”

And Psalm 103 – “who forgives all your sins, who heals all your diseases”

James, after all, is talking about the coming of the Lord –

the restoration of the kingdom of God –

the day when everything will be made right!

When things are out of whack, what should you do?

Call the elders.

This is spiritual warfare that James is talking about!

David Powlison points out that in the NT,

Jesus and his apostles never command *the church* to cast out demons.

How are *we* commanded to *do* spiritual warfare?

James 5:14 is one of the clearest statements of *how* we do this!

We pray – and we anoint with oil.

When you have your elders praying for you –

that means that you have those who are charged with your spiritual care,
fighting for you – waging war on your behalf!

Dan McCartney then points out that

“Corporate prayer requires corporate confession,

and this produces corporate forgiveness.” (257)

after all, after all of the third person singular in verse 15,

the “you” in verse 16 is plural –

c. Confess Your Sins to One Another: the Power of Prayer (v16)

¹⁶ *Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.*

This certainly may include bodily healing.

But James’ concern is with the health of the body – the health of the community –
both present and future.

If he is just interested in healing the body,

then why does he talk about the forgiveness of sins?

But if he is just interested in saving “souls” –

then why does he talk about healing?

Because James wants you to see

that you are not just an isolated individual in your own little isolated world.

You are connected to “one another.”

Confessing your sins to one another is simply a part of loving God and neighbor.

And particularly, think back to the sorts of sins that James has highlighted already!

Sins of the tongue – when you have spoken against your brother.

The wars and quarrels that have arisen because we follow our passions.

Grumbling against others.

When sin is not dealt with – then the result is a growing canker in the body –

a sore that is left unresolved and continues to spread.

Left unchecked, selfishness will result in mutual assured destruction!

And the reason is simple:

We are not very good at dealing with sin individually!

In fact, we are very *bad* at it!

We need one another – primarily because we need each other’s *prayers*.

“Confess your sins to one another and *pray for one another*.”

Why?

Because

The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.^[b]

It is powerful because it changes things.

Prayer changes things – because God responds to the prayers of the righteous!

And I can’t think of a better example than the one that James chooses in verses 17-18:

d. The Example of Elijah (v17-18)

¹⁷ *Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth.* ¹⁸ *Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.*

If Elijah didn’t pray, then *none of this* happens.

If Elijah doesn’t pray, then Ahab and Jezebel continue on their merry way,
destroying the people of God!

But Elijah prayed!

I’ve known a few people like this in my life.

When they pray, God listens.

What’s their secret?

Well, first, as James says, “the prayer of a *righteous person* has great power.”

You kind of have to be *righteous* in order for this to work!

All Christians have an *imputed righteousness* in our justification.

God has *declared* us righteous in his sight through the work of Jesus.

But that’s not what James is talking about here.

James is talking about the sort of righteousness that we see in Zechariah and Elizabeth.

The sort of righteousness we see in Job or Elijah.

A righteousness that is expressed in the *life* of the person –

so that their life is *ordered* in the service of the kingdom of Christ.

But think about Elijah’s prayer –

he had to send his servant back *seven times*!

He was praying for what God had *promised*!

He was asking God to send the rain that God had said he would send!

But even Elijah had to be patient and steadfast in prayer!

And even so, we need to be patient and steadfast in prayer
as we pray for healing, forgiveness, and salvation for ourselves and others!

And that's where James concludes – with an exhortation,
encouraging us to be *persistent* in seeking to reclaim the wanderer:

e. Restoring the Wanderer (v19-20)

¹⁹ My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, ²⁰ let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Wandering from the truth includes both doctrine and life.

Wandering from the truth is fundamentally about straying from the community of faith.

So if you see your brother wandering –
if you see your sister straying from the path –
go bring them back!

I find it interesting that in a passage that starts with the importance of the elders
in praying with the sick and anointing them –
the rest of the passage emphasizes how *every Christian* is to be involved in this.

There is a way in which the elders have a symbolic role!

But not a mere empty symbol!

The pattern of the elders anointing the sick with oil
is more than just an empty ritual.

It is a pattern for a community that is filled with the Spirit of God –
a community that confesses sin, restores wanderers –
and finds a measure of healing in this broken world.

And where the elders set this pattern,
you see a congregation that embodies it more and more
in the one anothering of life.

Some have been puzzled by the last line:

*“whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death
and will cover a multitude of sins.”*

If you asked James – “whose sins? Mine or the other guy?”

I rather think he would look at you suspiciously and say, “Why does it matter?”

After all, for James, neither obedience nor faith is optional.

And so his epistle closes by linking faith and works,
love and atonement,
corporate life and individual life,
present righteousness and future judgment,
intercession and confession.” (McCartney, 265)

Throughout his letter,

James has spoken about what genuine faith looks like.

Genuine faith remains *steadfast* in the midst of trials –
because we *know* where these trials are going.

These trials will end with the coming of the Lord.