

## Be patient in suffering

- James 5:10-11
- In his book, *Strong and Weak*, Andy Crouch writes about being in a meeting where Abby, an Asian-American physician, told a story from her childhood. The question in the meeting was this: when did the topic of justice become important to you? Abby said she grew up in Needham, a suburb of Boston. There was convenience store named The Little Peach there, and one day Abby went there with her father. He needed to use the copy machine in the store. Abby was 7 or 8 years old, but the memory of what happened is as clear as though it had happened yesterday. Her father had been born in China, and had poor English, she said. He had trouble figuring out how to get the copier to work, but he couldn't explain the problem to the storeowner. "The owner became furious with my father," Abby said. "He started mocking my dad's Chinese accent. Then he grabbed my father's papers, ripped them up, tossed them on the floor, and told us to get out of the store." Abby paused, and then said, "I had always known my father and strong, kind and smart. I had never seen him humiliated like that in front of me. He was so ashamed—I was so ashamed."
- When I read that it reminded me of a story that WD Leath told me several years ago. WD's wife Satherine was a member of Antioch for many years, and after she died, WD started coming to worship with us. He lives with his son in Raleigh now, and at 90 years old, his health is starting to fail. But WD lived in Burlington for many years, and told me about the days when, as a black man, he had to go to the back door of a certain restaurant to get a hot dog. Blacks weren't allowed inside.
- Last week we looked at the previous verses, and were reminded that we are called as followers of Jesus to be patient. As a farmer has to depend on God for so much that is outside his control, so are we to do. We are to establish our hearts so that we learn to trust God and do away with worry and grumbling. Both erode our trust and damage our relationships with God and with one another.
- Today we pick up this theme of patience again, but this time James illustrates patience with suffering, because the two are traveling companions. We grow in patience if we suffer well, and we suffer well by practicing patience, by looking to the Lord to be the lifter of our head. Some might say, wouldn't the world be a better place if there were no suffering? Malcolm Muggeridge actually believed the opposite! "I would almost rather eliminate happiness. The world would be the most ghastly place because everything that corrects the tendency of this unspeakable little creature, man, to feel over-important and over-pleased with himself would disappear. He's bad enough now, but he would be absolutely intolerable if he never suffered." James uses two illustrations from Scripture to help us see this so that we might put iron in our hearts.
- Let's look at this text and the two points that James makes about suffering and patience, in the prophets who spoke in their suffering, and in Job who persevered with hope in his suffering.
- **The prophets spoke the truth**
- The Old Testament is filled with examples of prophets who spoke the truth that was given to them by God, and suffered greatly for it. You hear Jeremiah referred to as the weeping prophet, because he did weep over the hardness of his fellow countrymen's hearts, but many have said rightly that he was the persevering prophet who proclaimed God's message to Israel for more than 40 years, through the overthrow of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, and beyond, and only saw two converts from his preaching in all those years. Jeremiah was relentless because as we said last week, he had iron in his heart put there by God and kept there by his faithful obedience. Isaiah, another major prophet, was sawn in two according to tradition. Moses suffered because of the constant grumbling of 3 million people God called him to lead to freedom. Elijah defeated the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, spoke the truth to King Ahab and his evil wife Jezebel, and ran for his life. We think of Daniel in the lion's den because he refused to turn his heart away from God and follow the culture. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were thrown into the fiery furnace because they spoke

the truth about God and refused to bow to the idol of the day. Most of those, Isaiah being the exception, survived the trials. Hebrews 11 reminds us that many did not: "They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated – of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains and in dens and caves of the earth." (Heb. 11:37-38) Jesus refers to these men and women, as he weeps over Jerusalem, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!" (Mt 23:37) Then in Acts 7, you hear Stephen cry out to his persecutors, sums up the plight of the prophets as he is being stoned to death for speaking the truth: "Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?"

- What's our application? One is this: God allows suffering in the lives of those who speak for Him so that their life will back up their message. A second application is this: We are not to go silent in times of suffering. Remember, "The will of God will never lead you where the grace of God cannot keep you." When hard times come because we love God and speak of Him freely, we keep speaking, like Jeremiah. We keep praying, like Daniel. We keep standing, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. We keep preaching, like Stephen. To be patient like a prophet, then, is not to stand idly by and do nothing, or to throw up your hands and say, "There's no use. Nothing I do will matter." Those options have not been given to us as followers of the Lamb that was slaughtered for our sins.
- Remember, Jesus said in the beatitudes, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Perhaps James is thinking of that when he says, "Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast." That reminded me that we must consider the blessing of being in fellowship with people who endure great trials and remain steadfast in their faith. The Laings continue to be a great example to us. We have been strengthened by their faith and their Christ-honoring testimony in the midst of great sorrow. Others in the body who have suffered chronic pain or sickness, or who have gone through cancer treatments, or have suffered another type of loss, are examples to us, and a blessing to us. We learn from them and we are better prepared to be that same blessing to others when it is our turn. Then James turns to the example of Job.
- **Job persevered with hope**
- Verse 11: "You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord." What an understatement! Job was a godly man whom the Bible says, "feared God and turned away from evil." His soul was blessed. He also was greatly blessed as a father, as we know children are a blessing, a gift from the Lord. Job had ten blessings, seven boys and three girls, who loved each other, and we are told that they all got together in each other's houses to celebrate their birthdays. Job was blessed with a loving family. Next, he was blessed with great wealth. He owned 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 oxen, and 500 donkeys. Finally, he was blessed with good health. You remember the story. Satan appears before God's throne in heaven and says he has been roaming the earth. God asks him, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" Satan responds that the only reason Job fears God is because he hasn't suffered. Everything in his life is blessed by God. "But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." God gives Satan permission to steal, kill, and destroy, anything and everything except Job himself. So in one day, ONE day, Job is hit with four colossal tragedies, any one of which would undo most people. First, a servant comes in and reports that the Sabeans had taken his oxen and his donkeys, and killed the servants tending them. No sooner had he left then another servant rushes in with the news that fire had come from heaven and burned up all of Job's sheep and the servants tending them. Then a third messenger came in and told Job that the Chaldeans had raided and taken all of his camels, and killed the servants who tended them. Finally, a servant who must have been

horrified to bring this news, told Job that his oldest son's house where all ten of his children were gathered, had collapsed and killed all of them. What unimaginable pain and sorrow! In a span of a few hours, Job had lost nearly everything he held dear, especially his children whom he loved. What did Job do? He got up, tore his robe, shaved his head, "and fell on the ground and worshiped." He said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." He was steadfast. He proved that He did not worship God because of what he had or did not have.

- The next counsel in heaven took place with God again pointing to Job as a man who feared God. "Skin for skin!" Satan snarled. "All that a man has, he will give for his life. But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." God allows Satan to strike Job, but tells him he cannot take his life. The next scene we find Job sitting on the ground, in ashes, covered from head to toe with boils. The picture God paints with this scene is one of intense agony. There was no salve for the boils, no Tylenol for the pain, no relief available whatsoever. It must have been horrifying because Job's wife took one look at him, still in grief herself over all that she had lost, and said, "Do you still hold fast your integrity?" (Or, are you still steadfast, Job?) Curse God and die." She saw his suffering for how destructive and hopeless it seemed to be, though her response was sinful. She was not blessed by his steadfastness. And he was certainly not blessed by her blasphemous response to his suffering.
- Let's not paint Job as perfect. Job did complain. A lot. He did question God. Plenty. William Barclay wrote, "Job's is no groveling, passive unquestioning submission. Job struggled and questioned, and sometimes even defied, but the flame of faith was never extinguished in his heart." He never renounced God, nor turned his face away from Him. He persevered in unimaginable pain and suffering. I saw a man last September that I have known for 35 years or so, and have always liked this man, though our paths rarely cross. He has suffered with crippling arthritis his whole adult life, and I know I cannot begin to imagine the pain and suffering he has endured. But when I knew him back then, he was a vibrant Christian. When I saw him at a Love and Valor concert, with his stability dog, a huge German Shepherd named Jake, I told him it was great to see him. I asked him after we chatted for a few minutes where he was going to church these days. "I don't go to church any more," he said. I said, "What? You don't need church any more?" He said, "No." Then I said, "You didn't stop believing in Jesus, did you?" And he looked me in the eye and said, "I did." I asked him why and he simply said, "Life." It broke my heart, and I know he has struggled through this pain mostly alone, as he has never married, and nobody could know exactly what this man has suffered. Except Jesus. And Job. Job would know. He was essentially left alone, because his wife was no help, and his three friends were no help, either, once they started talking. But Job remained steadfast. He said, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God." And we know that at the end, Job is out of words, and his heart is broken and bitter, and God speaks out of a whirlwind, and Job repents. Job was purified by this suffering. His pride was exposed as he questioned God over and over and maintained his innocence. And at the end he cried out to God, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:5-6) The suffering that Job went through, and persevered in, purified him. So important for us to put this truth as iron into our hearts! As Hebrews 12:10 says, "He disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness." After this, God restored everything Job had had, and gave him double of his livestock. And ten more children. And mostly He gave Job humility and trust in God that he would never had experienced without great suffering.
- What does James take from the story of Job? He teaches it to us: "You have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful." We learn from this story that what we are going through is never the end of the story. We can't see the end, any more than Job could see it, but God can. He's already there, and He is working out every detail so we can see it, too.