

## *Life in the Pain Cave*

James 5:7-12

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This morning, we continue in this series in the book of James. Next week, we will finish in the book of James. And this week finishes this segment where James has been shifting between different audiences. A couple weeks ago, through pastor Song, we looked at how James was encouraging the church and calling the church to care for one another and to consider how they are to worship and depend upon God. We learned at how he's also spoken to those who are outside the church, those who find their identity in their wealth, and how dangerous it is to find our identity in our resources and the things that we have.

Today, James shifts his focus back to the church where he's now speaking to them in the midst of their suffering. It's important to remember the context. He's been dealing with this throughout the letter. But the particular challenge he's dealing with in this particular passage is he's reminding them in the midst of their suffering to be dependent on the Lord and to walk in patience and endurance. What specifically is he referring to? He's specifically referring to those in the church who have faced oppression by those who are wealthy and those who are rich who are lording it over those who do not have wealth. Another way of looking at it is those who had power are oppressing those who do not. And James is calling them on how they are to live in the midst of that oppression.

What's interesting is the congregation has struggled at times. Earlier on in the letter, you'll remember that they struggled with this idea of whether they show partiality to those who have wealth. And that's one way of dealing with oppressors. In the words of pastor PD, they can seek to butter up the oppressors and get close, try to please them, keep them happy, and then maybe they will not fall under their oppression. But another way to fight oppression is to strike out in violent vengeance. That's something that James says is not the call of the Christian. We're to cry out. We're to call out injustice. But what does it look like to avoid both spectrums, to avoid both trying to show partiality to those who are rich and causing oppression and to avoid seeking out violent vengeance against them? This is not to suggest there's a middle way. No. It's not a middle way. It's the gospel way. It's the way of living out the faith in dependence on the Lord in the midst of what I've titled this sermon as, *Life in the Pain Cave*.

Hear now God's word. James 5:7-12.

Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. 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. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

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. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. May God bless the preaching of His word.

This spring, I have taken a good deal of time enjoying a book by the runner and now retired marathoner and very committed Christian Ryan Hall. You've heard me refer to him several weeks ago, and he is still the reigning American who's run the fastest marathon, which was a two-hour four-minute

marathon. And he also holds the record of running the fastest half marathon. In his book titled *Run the Mile You're In*, he talks about his experience of pain and suffering in the latter half of the New York City marathon. And this is what he writes.

"Shortly after the halfway mark, you hit First Avenue. It's slightly downhill, and the crowds are massive and loud. So all the runners feel a major surge of adrenaline. Left unchecked, this adrenaline can run high to lead you to run faster than you think you are able and faster than you should, creating big problems once that adrenaline wears off. I was a casualty of First Avenue on this particular day, not because I surged too hard but rather because I couldn't go when the lead group began to increase the pace resulting in my drifting outside the top ten. I remember running down First Avenue after the lead pack had dropped me thinking, I know how to get back to my hotel from here. Maybe I'll just rip off my number, cut off the course to avoid the suffering of those last 11 miles.

"But then I thought about why I was racing. I wasn't running for myself. I was actually running that day to raise money to create awareness and provide for those who live in extreme poverty. As I thought about those that I was running for and stopped focusing on my pain, disappointment, and discouragement, my body relaxed. When I got outside of my suffering by focusing on loving others, what happened in my heart slowly began to manifest itself in my physical being. This has been a huge lesson that I have learned when attempting to overcome pain. Trying harder doesn't help. Often, it feels like the harder I try the worse I perform. I've had to learn to let my performances flow out of my body rather than trying to force them to happen.

"And over the last 11 miles on that day of the New York City marathon, instead of enduring a slow and painful run, I worked my way up to finish just behind the third place runner, bringing home a payday that enabled me to provide for that organization that my wife and I had started. That never would have happened had I not stopped dwelling on my pain and started focusing on others. After that, I began to think about those I loved whenever I raced. I found the most powerful tool for overcoming pain is being motivated by love."

When we consider what James is saying here to the church of Jesus Christ, it's important for us to put suffering in its proper context. Suffering and the difficulty of their circumstances, regardless of what brought them about, does not define them. Our circumstances, our suffering does not define us. But our suffering and our circumstances can and do shape us. The question is how will it shape us? Just as Ryan Hall said, was he going to allow his pain, his suffering, his discouragement, and disappointment to identify him or was he going to seek to allow it to shape him by focusing on something else even though his circumstances were crying out at him to stop?

I think this is precisely, in a very spiritual way, in a very relational way, what James is encouraging the church to which he is writing to think about. They are tempted to just stop, to stop running, to give up, to be discouraged, to give in, or to act out in unhealthy and disobedient ways. Instead, he's giving them, if you will, a coaching lesson of what life in the pain cave looks like. That is, instead of focusing on the pain, instead of focusing on the suffering, or even on the ones causing the suffering, rather, what they can do is they can seek to respond in faithfulness to the Lord so that they can endure knowing that the Lord is doing something, and He promises to do something in the end.

So let's look at this together as we consider this passage. There's two things I want us to look at this morning, and they are inward posture and outward response. What you'll notice in the opening verses of this text, one of the things that James is talking about is in the Greek, he's actually giving them two very bold commands that they are to consider that, I think, forms the inward fortitude that he's calling them to. The first command that he gives them is to practice patience. It's summed up when he tells them to be patient, of course. But what it means is he's not talking about a passive action where they just sort of sit back and wonder, okay, what's going to happen? And I'll figure it out as it comes. No. It actually is an active inward response to the difficulty of their circumstances.

So James says to them to practice patience. Well, what does he mean when he tells them this? Literally put, patience means, from the scriptures and in life, enduring suffering with an attitude of trust as opposed to a fearful anxiety. And in some sense, the practice of impatience is an active choice in the midst of suffering not ignoring the suffering, but rather recognizing that it's not the end of the story. He's actually encouraging them to have the long view. He's reminding them that God actually has this, that He will provide, that He will actually restore, that He will bring suffering to an end. And what's interesting, he says, "Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord." So what does he do? He's actually grounding this command to be patient with the long view in grounding it in the promise of God, what theologians call the parousia, the coming of the Lord.

And so what he's telling them is you're to ground this idea of being patient, this long view in the midst of suffering, on the reality that God has said He will come again, that the end of the story is God's restoration and not our suffering. The end of the story is the victory of God and the reward that comes from God's grace and compassion to His children who walk in trust with Him and not the victory of the oppressors. Ultimately, what defines us is not our suffering but the promise of God, the person of God, as we were talking about with the children, the glory of God, the coming of the Lord.

In fact, if you remember if you've looked at all at one of the most controversial books, and yet, a very fun book to read, Revelation where John writes this. He says,

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings on earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." [ESV]

When James refers to the coming of the Lord, he means all of this and all the contents of God's pantry of characteristics of His power and His victory. Notice what John writes about the nature of Christ. "Even those who pierced him," even those who crucified Him will see the victorious Christ. So what defines Christ? What defines Christ is His victory. His suffering has earned for Him the victory and the vindication of His Father. The glory of Christ is victory over sin and death of which those who call upon Jesus Christ, and if you do, this is our victory. This is our grounding. And this is why James can say, practice patience. The end of the story, thanks be to God, is not Good Friday. The end of the story is not even Resurrection Sunday. The end of the story is the coming of the Lord, the Alpha and the Omega. He will restore. He will redeem. He will make all things new.

But James doesn't just tell them to be patient here. He also says in these words, "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. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand." This idea is, of course, as we walk in patience and practice that it is like the farmer. All we can do is walk in obedient trust knowing that the Lord has this, knowing that this is not the end of the story. But it's the Lord who brings the rain. It's the Lord who will do these things. And we do wait patiently upon Him.

But while we wait, does that mean we do nothing other than wait? No. There are things to do. And when James says here to "Establish your hearts," what he's saying as this second command is not just to practice patience but to ground our hearts. What does that mean? It means what is the foundation that your confidence is built upon? That's biblical language for the idea of confidence and the heart. The heart is not the seat merely of emotions; the heart is the seat of the will, of the love, of our desires. It's what moves us. It's what drives us. It's what inspires us. We're driven by this thing. And so what he's saying and asking in essence is what are you grounding your heart in? And so he reminds them to "Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand."

I believe what James is saying is to stand firm in Christ and His word. How do I know that? I know that because of what he says with regard to the other example. He doesn't give just the example of the farmer. He gives the example of the prophet. And he says this in verse 10, "As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord." Now, if we remember prophets, if you've not read it, I encourage you to go and read the book of Isaiah, the book of Ezekiel, or choose one of the minor prophets if you will. But what's very clear is they weren't walking under their own understanding. They weren't doing things according to their own choice. They were walking in dependence on God in the midst of a lot of pushback. A lot of heat came at the prophets. And, yet, what was their hope? They grounded themselves in the promise of God's calling on their lives, and He gave them a word to speak. Their words were secondary to God's word that they had given them to speak.

And I think when he gives us as an example wedded with this command to establish our hearts, to ground our hearts, I believe it is to ask, is our confidence built on our own understanding? Is it built on our own words? Is it built on our own abilities? No. He's calling them to be grounded and to stand firm in Christ and His word, to marinate on what God is, what He has done, what He will do. Therefore, we begin to establish our love, our will, our words, our relationships on who God is in Christ Jesus and what He has told us in His word. If we think about it, at the fall of Adam and Eve, God gives the promise of redemption. At Israel's slavery in Egypt, He promises to free them, and He sets them free. Israel, even in the midst of their sin, God rescues Israel. In Christ, He redeems His people through His death on the cross. In Jesus's death on the cross, God raises Christ from the dead in the power of the resurrection. And in this life, between the resurrection of Christ and the coming of the Lord, we walk and we're called to stand firm in what the word has said God has done, God is doing, and God promises to do.

For when James says, "Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand," I want to suggest to you he's telling them and inviting them: I know everything around you screams to take it up in your own understanding, but I'm calling you back to ground your hearts in the truth, the power, and the trustworthiness of who God says He is and He will do in His word.

And this being the Sunday of Pentecost, I'm reminded of what Jesus said in the gospel of John. "You can do nothing apart from me." We cannot walk through suffering being dependent on CNN or Fox News. We can't be dependent on all of our traditional ways to try to get us through, to fight through. We can try, but we will not see what God is doing unless we turn to Him in the midst of our suffering and our pain, and even in the midst of oppression, and say, Lord, I cry out to you in the midst of it. Be present with me that this would not be the end of the story, but the coming of the Lord would be. Give me the grounding in your word that gives me the hope that I need. And this is how we speak to our Lord even as children come to their parents and ask them for all kinds of things without reservation. I believe if we are grounded in God's word, we can go to the Lord with all kinds of requests, and cries, complaints, worries, exhaustion, pain, suffering, and cry out. I encourage you simply, go read the Psalms. And we see the psalmists lead us in that. They do all of those things but grounded in the glory of who God is.

But I want to stop here before I move to my last point. It's important for us to remember as a church that in some ways the greatest suffering that we might be facing is not the same kind of suffering that the church faced here. The church was facing the suffering of those who were rich and oppressing the poor. And we might just be facing the difficulties and very real difficulties of this pandemic, not being able to be with friends or with family, and having to stay at home, and not being able to go to work regularly. And there is a lot from which we are having to deal with. And it's very tempting in this text to make it a very private thing simply just between me, myself, and Jesus.

But while we may not be facing the same kind of oppression and difficulty that those who received this letter are, we can take the opportunity to provide a space, words of encouragement, prayers for mercy and compassion for those who are facing oppression. And this last week has been a very real example, the death and murder of George Floyd at the hands of a police officer. He did not die because he was a Christian or because he was poor or needy. He died because of his race. And that is a very different kind of suffering than what James is pointing to.

But I want to suggest to us that this is an opportunity for us to say, while we may not be facing this same kind of suffering, as we see all kinds of reaction happening in our country, we cannot use these verses as a way to try to silence others as they cry out against injustice, nor can we merely use it as a private devotion between ourselves and Jesus. Rather, we can come to this passage and say, by practicing patience and grounding our hearts in who God says He is, we can ask the God of compassion and mercy, the God of power and strength, that He would bring justice to bear in our country, and that He would bring healing to our African American brothers and sisters and Christ and to the African American community. And I think it is wise for us as the church of Jesus Christ to take time to listen and to pray. Neither one is passive. Listening is never passive. But to listen to the suffering of others instead of entering into judgment. To listen and to pray and to cry out not just when we feel injustice and oppression but wherever it may be exhibited.

So it's important for us as we consider this inward posture of practicing patience and grounding our hearts in the word of God. James does move towards an outward response. And as we look at verse 11, what he says is, "Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful." I believe what he is calling the church here to do is yet another call, another command, to fix our eyes on His purpose. And what I believe that means is just a simple review of where we've been over the last several paragraphs.

Consider for just a moment not just the passage which we are looking at this morning but consider how God is shaping us in the midst of suffering and oppression, how we're to practice patience and ground our hearts in His word. While we are to consider that and fix our eyes on that purpose, we're also to consider this, to consider God in our plans as James told us in chapter 4.

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make profit" - yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." [ESV]

It's a reminder to consider not ourselves but to consider what God is doing. And that our plans, we don't make them up and then ask God to baptize them, but we ask God by His Spirit to help us to develop what we ought to do. Lord, what do you want us to do?

That's just one part. And then the next part, consider others better than yourselves. James tells us, again, in chapter 4, "Do not speak evil against one another, brothers." And he tells us in this passage, "Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door." It's so easy in the midst of suffering to grumble and to complain either at the lack of suffering of someone else or maybe that somebody's not recognizing your suffering. We get impatient

with one another. By fixing our eyes on what God is doing in the midst of our suffering, it doesn't mean we stop in our obedience. Rather, we double down, and we ask that God by His Spirit would help us to consider others better than ourselves. Consider how our own desires when they go unmet, or when somebody cuts in our way, we quarrel and we fight against one another, James 4:1.

He's calling us to not just fix our eyes on God's purpose as some nebulous thing. He's actually calling us to the way of obedience. And the way of obedience is through reconciliation. What do I mean? "Do not grumble against one another" is certainly a call to reconciliation. How do we need to consider one another and to forgive one another? But there's also reconciliation between us and God to recognize He is the one who directs our steps. He is the one whose knowledge is greater than our own, and we do not do anything apart from Him. And we seek to ask Him, Lord, in the midst of this suffering, what are you doing? By fixing our eyes on His purpose, an outward response would begin, I think, by asking this question. Lord, what are you teaching us in the midst of this suffering that we would not learn any other way?

You see, I've heard it said, and perhaps you have as well, that in every tunnel, there's always light at the end of the tunnel. But I must confess to you that I don't always find that to be true because when you're in the tunnel in the darkness of suffering, something happens to our eyes, does it not? Our eyes begin to adjust to the darkness. And it is so easy in the midst of that darkness to give up, to despair, to forget, and to go our own way. This has been the story of humanity. Even in the midst of God's redemption, Israel failed to follow, and they gave up. They turned to their own ways. The same is the case for everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord who trusts in Him. It is always tempting in the midst of suffering that the suffering so distracts us that it becomes like darkness, and our eyes become adjusted to the darkness. And we forget that the Lord has said, I am coming again, and what will define you is not suffering but victory.

I think this is why James brings up Job. Job grumbled. Job lost hope. Job yet endured. But he saw at the end that while the Lord placed this suffering upon him, the Lord also restored him. And the same is the message for us, not that God will restore our fortunes as He did for Job, but that He does promise restoration. For what does the text say? You have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. The Lord is compassionate and merciful.

Therefore, we know this, that in the midst of the darkness, God's word calls out as a light that our eyes might be adjusted away from the darkness and despair, but to look to His promise, that the Lord is compassionate, the Lord is merciful, and the Lord is with us in the valley of the shadow of death. We shall fear no evil. This is what God's word says to us.

I know what God is teaching me. I wonder what He is teaching you. I encourage you to ask, Lord, what are you teaching us during this time that we can learn in no other way? Do not allow our eyes, O Lord, to be adjusted to the darkness and challenges of our present moment. Do not allow others to fall into despair into giving up. But rather, O Lord, restore our sight that our eyes might be fixed upon your purpose of restoration, for the Lord is the Alpha and the Omega. And you will return again.

This is the promise of the Lord. This is the Lord of compassion and mercy. And I pray that He would greet you today.

And if you do not know the Lord Jesus Christ, I want to say to you today that the Christian faith does not deny suffering. It does not explain away suffering. It does not belittle suffering. And it doesn't bury our suffering under a box and say, never bring it out. Nor does it promise that suffering will always end in great financial restoration. But the Lord does tell us at the heart of our Christian faith that Jesus Christ, who suffered for us through no sin of His own, took on our sin that at the end of that we receive the blessing of forgiveness, restoration, and new life. And that promise is a promise to you, and that we can bring all of our suffering to Him, and say, Lord, receive my suffering and receive me. Forgive me for my blindness. Forgive me for not seeing you at work. Lord, save me and redeem me. Help me. I encourage you to pray that prayer and ask that the Lord would make His compassion and mercy new to

you today for that is His promise as the prophet tells us in Lamentations 3, "For his mercy and compassion is made new every morning." And may you know that today. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you this morning for your promise that you are working in us in the midst of suffering and difficulty, in the midst of this pain cave. You are doing something in us and for us that we cannot always understand. And, yet, there are lessons to be learned. There are things that you call us to do to walk in patience, to ground our hearts into your word, and to fix our eyes on your purpose. And walking in obedience means that we turn not in grumbling towards one another but in compassion as we have been shown compassion, to consider others better than ourselves because you have shown us great mercy and compassion. Lord, you are glorious. You are good. And your promise as the Alpha and the Omega is that you will come again. Just as surely as you have given your Spirit to the church, we ask that your Spirit equip us to wait patiently, to walk in dependence in the midst of pain and difficulty, and that may we endure by your Spirit and word to see you come again for the glory of the Lord. And may you overturn all injustice. May you overturn and bring justice on all oppression. And may you free and bring redemption and restoration to all things for the glory of Christ and the restoration of the whole earth. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.