

## James IRL: How We Wait, James 5:7-20, 11/26/23

When you travel to different countries and cultures, you realize that words like “soon” and “almost” and “nearby” are relative. During my sabbatical this Summer, I visited our missionaries and my longtime friends Pastor Steve and Mary Ngenga in Kenya. One morning Steve and I traveled to a nearby town to meet a contractor who was going to do some work on a building project. Steve said, let’s wait here, he will be here soon. So I thought, soon...probably 5-10 minutes. Five minutes passed, 10 minutes passed, and we are waiting...and waiting...an hour passed. Steve just seemed very calm, and I said, “So what time did he say he would meet you?” Steve just smiled, knowing that he had an American in his car, he decided to mess with me a bit and said, “Soon, sometime today.” I said, “Sometime today? That’s not soon!” And he said, “Pastor Nate, this is Kenya, today is soon.” Raise of hands, how many of you like waiting? In traffic do you often find yourself switching lanes trying to get in the one that seems to be going faster? Does slow wifi drive you crazy? Do you hang up your customer service call in frustration if you have to wait longer than 10 minutes?

Today we are going to talk about a distinctly Christian approach to waiting. Now it’s hard enough to wait for things as trivial as slow traffic and wifi. But the kind of waiting that James is going to address is implied in the beginning of verse 7: **Be patient, LONGSUFFERING.** We’re not talking about brief flickers of annoyance in an otherwise comfortable life. We’re talking about LONG seasons of suffering. This was the situation that many of the readers of James’ letter were in. Remember last week in 5:1-6, Pastor Matthew told you about how many of the Christians were poor and being financially taken advantage of, with little to no recourse. Their lot in this life it appeared, was going to be injustice. Few, if any of us have been waiting in these conditions. But that doesn’t minimize the longsuffering we do experience. How about waiting in a job you dislike but you don’t see any other prospects...but picturing yourself still in this job 5 years from now makes you nauseous? Or you have been waiting so long for Mr. or Mrs. Right? Or you are in a difficult marriage and you are waiting for something to give? Or you are waiting through a physical or mental health issue that the doctors don’t seem to know how to treat? Longsuffering. This might describe some of us here. The question is not if we will have to wait like this, but how will we wait when the specter of longsuffering comes to visit us, as we all will face in this life? James will show us that there is a way to wait so that you **thrive**- in fact you become stronger, more resilient, and at the same time softer hearted, compassionate. And there is a way to wait that will **eat you alive**- make you weaker, unable to cope with life, and more hard-hearted, cynical, resentful. From verses 7-20 James toggles between these two ways to wait and so that’s what we are going to do.

***7 Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming.*** Here James gives us the secret sauce, the core belief of the Christian that is the basis for thriving, even in longsuffering. The distinctly Christian anchor in our longsuffering is that great doctrine of the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming of Jesus Christ. See the gospel isn’t just that Jesus came to earth to die in the place of sinners like all of us, so that we can be forgiven...that’s only half of the gospel. It’s also that he rose from the dead, ascended into heaven and he is coming back to conquer death and evil once and for all to reign forever and ever. If life is short relative to eternity, then we can wait patiently, even in

suffering. Like Teresa of Avila, once said, "From heaven, even the most miserable life will look like one night in an inconvenient hotel."

James gives us a helpful illustration from the life of the farmer. *See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains.*<sup>8</sup> *You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.* You want to learn the virtue of patience, spend a year on a farm. Farmers have to wait for the harvest, there is nothing they can do to speed the process, and especially in James' day, they were solely dependent on the rains to come. But the reason they could wait patiently is because their hope is in the coming rains, and with it the harvest season.

In the same way, James says we are to "establish our hearts"[verse slide] the core doctrine of the return of Jesus. In high school, I did some Greco Roman wrestling in the summers between regular wrestling season. When you are in the bottom position [Pictures], your goal is keep your base, anchored to the mat and not get turned. The top wrestler is going to do everything he can to toss you to score. This is a picture of what is happening in suffering. Suffering is going to try to turn and toss us around. And James says, what is going to establish your heart, what's going to keep your base and keep you from being turned is a belief stronger than your circumstances. See waiting through suffering on the return of Christ isn't laziness, it isn't sitting around letting the world throw you. It is active resistance to allowing our suffering to toss us, to have us react in an ungodly way, to toss us into unbelief, into taking something into our own hands, into despair by actively waiting on the Lord. [verse slide]

Do you believe, I mean really believe this doctrine of the return of Jesus, not as wishful thinking, but a deep conviction? Do you believe our king is returning with an unending kingdom of love and joy that is infinitely more fulfilling and glorious than the most exhilarating, satisfying, peaceful moments of your earthly life? James says take your focus off your suffering and place it on the coming king.

But there is also a way to wait that will eat you alive<sup>9</sup> *Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door.* Grumbling is a seed that something is wrong at the heart level. You might recall that this was a core sin issue of Israel in the wilderness when they were growing tired of waiting. What was the heart problem? They didn't trust God, so they grumbled against Him, and then they started grumbling against Moses and each other. Which is what always happens. We take out our frustrations with God and the pain of our lives, the disappointments with how things are going or what we don't have, and we take that out on one another- work is hard and so we come home and take it out on our spouses or kids, or we take to social media, or we grumble to our co-workers, in our small group. We've all met people that it seems like this is all they do, negative all the time, always complaining about something. Grumbling reveals a lack of trust in God, a victim mentality that says, life isn't fair, there is no justice and God doesn't seem to care. But James says, hey remember the Judge is standing at the door. Growing up when my brothers and I were fighting, arguing causing my mom a lot of grief sometimes she wouldn't waste anymore of her effort, "Just wait until your dad gets home and hears about how you boys were today." Uh oh.

See James as a Christian, we should never resort to grumble about how unfair things are, because dad's coming home...Jesus, the Judge, is coming home. And when he does, he will restore all injustices, that he will roll back the curse and everything evil will be undone. Don't waste your life grumbling.

James tells us another way to wait that will eat us alive. <sup>12</sup> *Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple “Yes” or “No.” Otherwise you will be condemned.* Now at first I didn't see the connection between swearing oaths and waiting in suffering, but a commentary helped me out with this one "Of all the manifestations of impatience in times of stress and affliction the most frequent is the taking of the Lord's name in vain by the use of explosive utterances and hasty and irreverent oaths...When we become impatient and lose self-control, we tend to say things better left unspoken."<sup>1</sup> This not only includes what we would typically think of as cursing...but promises that we make out of impatience, that we cannot or shouldn't make. Promises of revenge of someone who wronged us or promises of what we will do for God if he delivers us from suffering. Promises we could make to our children or family- I swear to God that I will change if you give me another chance. Don't call down God from heaven or the Devil from Hell to back your promises or threats. Yes and No will do, let God be God and wait on Him to deliver and defend.

So James has showed us so far that we can [Slide] thrive by focusing on Jesus' return and not our suffering, and that grumbling and swearing will eat us alive in our waiting. Now is going to show us how to thrive in our waiting by talking about the power of prayer. I believe James is addressing 3 situations in the life of a Christ follower should pray. 1) The Suffering Christian- <sup>13</sup> *Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray.* I believe James has in mind the Christian who is suffering but holding their ground like that Greco Roman wrestler. They are suffering well. If you are going through suffering of any kind you hold your ground through the power of prayer- for deliverance, for strength, for peace, for inner character, for effective witness. Prayer is how we invite God into our suffering as our closest companion and to give us what we need for the battle. Let me skip the second situation in v.13b, we will come back to that in a special way as we close.

3) The Weak Christian v.14-16. Now these instructions from James are difficult to understand, and there are a variety of interpretations and a host of questions that are raised because of them. I'm going to share with you how I interpret these prayer instructions. <sup>14</sup> *Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord.* <sup>15</sup> *And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up.* Now there are many godly, solid pastors and churches that believe what James is referring to the physically sick- disease, ailment of some kind- that church leaders, particularly those leaders gifted with healing, should come around that person and pray for deliverance, and that God will physically heal that person, in fact it's promised- and a strictly literal reading of this passage may lead us to this conclusion. And then there are a host of other godly, solid

---

<sup>1</sup> R.V.G. Tasker, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, James*, p.124

pastors and churches that hedge on that and say, well let's not go that far... the anointing oil represents modern medicine, which is also a way that God delivers people from sickness, and when we pray it isn't a promise of healing, it's just that we should leave it in God's hands.

And I think the challenge with both interpretations is they seem to misunderstand what James means by the word translated "sick." [Verse slide] Just as in English this word has lots of meanings... "Dude, that's sick." This word can mean physical sickness which is the primary way this word is used in the gospels, however in Paul's letters he uses this word 17x, 14 of which he uses to describe someone's spiritual state of weakness, doubt and stumbling in their faith. Additionally, in verse 15 James uses a different Greek word translated sick, a word that is only used 3x in the New Testament all of which refer to spiritual sickness- Hebrews 12<sup>3</sup> *Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary (sick) and lose heart.* I believe James isn't talking about physical sickness here, but about spiritual sickness- that is a state of prolonged suffering that has caused a Christ follower grow weary and lose heart, to begin drifting in their faith, where cynicism is creeping in...where doubt of God's goodness, and fatigue, isolation are setting in. Where they may be falling into patterns of sin. Where they may be susceptible to lies of the enemy. And I believe this is who James is speaking about in verse 19-20 <sup>19</sup> *My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back,* <sup>20</sup> *remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*

What is it that weak Christian needs? James says, they need prayer reinforcements. They need the church elders, the pastors, church leaders and people mature in their faith to surround that brother or sister. When your faith is weak, when you are disillusioned and despairing and faith fatigued, what you need are people whose faith is strong to uphold you and bring you before the Lord. Notice James encourages the confession of sin and its cleansing power in verse 15-16. Because the role of the church leaders here is to carefully, surgically help discern if there is a root of sin- unbelief, lies, a sin pattern that needs to be confessed. This is what brings healing and deliverance, this is what is powerful and effective, this kind of soul surgery. I have personally on several occasions witnessed how affective this kind of prayer gathering has been for a spiritually fatigued or drifting brother or sister in the Lord.

This may describe some of you right now, or someone you are concerned about. Take James seriously, I want you to reach out to a pastor, a church leader, your small group leader. We want to help surround you in prayer and faith. Don't isolate yourself, don't be too proud. It's OK not to be OK, and we are committed to helping you not stay that way.

2) **The grateful Christian- sing praise v.13b**, I think James has in mind the person who was suffering, and was praying and God delivered them, or answered a prayer, or gave them peace, or a perspective on their suffering they didn't see before. Sometimes God changes our circumstances and sometimes he doesn't change our circumstances but changes us in the midst of our circumstances. When this happens- our response should be a praise of praise- also known as a testimony. Has God delivered you in some way? Has he given you a reason to be grateful this morning?

We just celebrated Thanksgiving, and I think it's fitting, in the spirit of thanksgiving and to live out James instruction to the grateful Christian here, to sing praise to God and to testify of his deliverance, our gratitude to him for something he has done for us. Invite Hayes and Sarah up.