

Advent 3

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[0 : 00] Be patient. Stand firm. Because the Lord's coming is near. There's a type of plant called the Chinese bamboo. It grows in a really, really unusual way.

! You plant seed and you water it, you fertilize it for about a year and nothing really seems to happen. You give it a second year of more water and fertilizing, waiting and again no sign of anything going on. Year three, more water, more fertilizer. Year four, more water, more fertilizer. Year five, more water, more fertilizer. And then it grows from zero up to 90 feet in five weeks. The big question is this. How long does it really take to grow?

Five weeks or five years? You see, as we go through our lives and we wait for the coming of Jesus as James urges us here. To be patient, stand firm, because the Lord is near. As we wait, we can have that sense that, well, what are we waiting for? We need to be reminded that all that time, all that time of praying, all the time of investing our energy, investing our time, our money, our giving, our lives, everything. There's stuff going on. We might not see it. It's below surface. As that old saying goes, nothing never happens.

So we need to hold close to these words of James. And we're tempted to think, well, come on. We're going at this for such a long time now. Where's the sign of God's kingdom in the world? Where's the sign of things happening in my life? What about this situation that I'm praying for, that I'm praying about, that I'm reaching out to God for? What's going on?

Remember these words. Be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Being patient is difficult. I'm not a naturally instinctive, patient person.

[2 : 43] I'm not. And there's a reason why James urges us to be patient. And there's a reason why in scripture there is this continual urge to be patient, why it's named as a fruit of the spirit. It's not something that comes natural to us. So don't be surprised when it is a struggle to be patient. Because most of the time, most of us aren't. And there's nothing new about this.

What is new is the culture within which we live, which makes it especially difficult to be patient because we live in a culture that actually thinks that having to be patient is a bad thing.

We live in a culture. We live in a culture that's a bad thing. And we live in a culture that's a bad thing. Next day delivery. We've got to wait until the next day for it to come. You send a message, you expect an immediate response.

Now, there's nothing wrong with that. In fact, that can be a really good thing. When things happen fast, that's great. But it's a danger when it shapes our understanding such that everything happening instantaneously becomes normalised. Because then when we have to wait at all, we get this instinct, this inner sense that, well, something must be wrong then. Because it hasn't happened immediately.

Apparently, a woman called United, phoned United Airlines a while back. And when she got through to the call handler, she said, could you tell me how long does it take to get from Dallas, Texas to Frankfurt, Germany?

[4 : 37] Well, the person taking the call had to look it up. So she said, just a minute. She said, thank you and hang up. LAUGHTER Great things.

Things that really matter take time. They always have. And this side of eternity always will. Think about that. It takes time to invest in something that's really worthwhile.

The violinist Fritz Kreisler lived from 1875 to 1962. He was reckoned to be one of the greatest players of the instrument ever.

A fan approached him one day after a concert and said to him, I would give my life to play as beautifully as you.

He said, I did. Things can't be rushed. We shouldn't expect them to be rushed. And so when we hear these words, be patient, we need to hear them for what they are.

[5 : 53] Be patient, urges James. Be patient. And he says, stand firm. In other words, he doesn't say just be patient, just kind of breed this virtue of your own accord.

He actually gives a very good reason for, or rather good way of how we are to be patient. Because it doesn't just come naturally. Stand firm.

He says, now this is one of those classic things that really is lost in translation. The English, this particular English translation, would say stand firm.

Greek New Testament would say establish your hearts, or fix your hearts. Now it kind of means the same thing.

But the Greek word kardios, from which we get cardiology, is there. Kardios, hearts. Establish your hearts. Set your hearts. Stand firm. Set your hearts.

[6 : 51] That's what he's saying. Be patient. Set your hearts. Establish your hearts. Now normally if you say, if you set your heart on something, it can be a dangerous thing. Because things can move.

And certainly, our hearts, our human emotions, can be quite fickle. We can't really rely on them that much. But it depends on what it is that we set our hearts on.

And that's the point. James here is talking about, when he says stand firm, he means establish your hearts on the thing that will not budge. On that upon which you can rely.

If you establish your heart, if you fix your heart, upon that which can be trusted, or he whom can be trusted, well that's a different thing.

You see, it all depends on the reliability of the one upon which we set our hearts.

[7 : 59] Because no building is ever stronger than the foundation upon which it has been set. The Leaning Tower of Pisa is a great example.

185 foot tall. I think they have stopped it leaning now. There was a massive project. I think it was about 20 years ago or so now. They realised that if they didn't take action, it was going to collapse. But even though it was built hundreds of years ago, that 185 foot tall building, which to begin with was on very soft and unstable subsoil anyway, was set on foundations that only went down three metres.

Now you compare that with some of the cathedrals that were built at the same time, when the actual foundations were as big as the cathedral that you can actually see itself. But just three metres of rock underneath a 185 foot structure, little wonder that it was leaning so much.

You see, something will only be as stable as that upon which it is established. If you want a more recent example, you may remember in 2008, Hurricane Ike that swept across Texas.

It completely and utterly obliterated whole communities. Except, there was one house that remained standing.

[9 : 28] Here's a picture, and it's quite shocking. The owners of that house had previously been victims of storms and flood, and had learnt the importance, when it came to rebuild, of setting things on firm foundations.

Interestingly, if you Google that image, and you see comments underneath, you'd be stunned, well maybe not, how many people said, please give me the number of that builder. Here's a question for us all.

What do we set our hearts on? We say set, I mean establish, I mean build. What do we build our lives on? What do you stand firm on? What is it that your heart, which will be fickle, because you're human, we all are.

What is it established on? James says, be patient, stand firm, establish your heart, fix your heart, build your heart, build your lives on the one who you can rely on.

Jesus. Because, he goes on to say, he is near. Now, when James wrote, because the Lord's coming is near, he was writing as a member of that first generation of Christians, some 2,000 years ago, who thought that Jesus' return was imminent, literally.

[11 : 10] And it took that first generation or so of Christians to work out and think through and process what it means to continue and to sustain as followers of Jesus when he didn't return, literally.

And it can be tempting for us some 2,000 years later to draw the conclusion that, well, how can you really take that seriously if some 2,000 years on and the continuation of war raging and people dying and suffering and pain, how can we continue to wait patiently on the Lord to stand firm?

There's never been a generation that hasn't asked and wrestled with that question. Of course not. But have you ever thought of it like this? Each of us, every single one of us, is less than a generation away from meeting with ultimate truth.

I don't mean to sound bleak when I say that, but we will all come to our own personal expiry dates on earth at some point and that won't be 2,000 years away.

We're called to build our lives, to set our hearts, our foundations on him because it's not that far off. the history of this world may roll on for quite a while longer before he comes to make all things new, but in terms of the place that we play, in terms of our own role within world history, well that time's limited.

[12 : 59] That's why these words are here to warn every generation to take it seriously. to be patient, to stand firm because it's not actually that long before we meet with eternity.

And that's an eternity that right now we can't see, but all the while the kingdom is coming and he is preparing that for us.

When I grew up on the Isle of Wight the house where I grew up there was a garage and I remember shortly after I first started driving I got my first car it was an Austin Allegro do you remember those? It was my pride and joy I had a square steering wheel and they did but 0 to 60 eventually this was on the Isle of Wight you can only go so far before you hit the sea or a wall or something anyway I can remember the early stages of having this car and the first time I ever topped up the washer fluid flipped open the bonnet and walked into the garage and my dad was really really tidy and organised and he had a tap in the garage but there was a hose connected to that tap and it was quite a long hose all tidily coiled up and the end of that hose pointed down into a bucket so I went out there with a jug wanting some water to fill up the washer fluid on the car and then I didn't know how to disconnect this hose so I looked at it and I thought well surely if I just turn the tap on put the jug underneath the end of that hose sooner or later

I'll get some water that's what I did turned on the tap there was a quiet hissing held the jug there and waited and waited and waited there was nothing really long hose I'd better turn the tap a little bit more hissing got a bit louder still no water still no movement turned the tap again and waited and waited and waited and waited suddenly I wasn't waiting anymore this hose just unleashed itself seemingly at the speed of light and snaked around the garage as I ran around trying to retrieve the end of it well by the end of the episode yes I turned the tap off and yes I got my water none of it was in the jug quite a lot of it was on me and a lot of it was on the floor you see all that time of waiting I couldn't see the water I could hear the faintest hiss but things were happening it was moving and all the time we pray and we wait for the kingdom and we prepare for the kingdom and we listen to these words of scripture which has been issued to every generation after generation after generation since they were written some 2,000 years ago things are happening we can't see them most of the time we're not aware of them but things are happening the Lord is near and one day and it won't be that far off in the scheme of things historically we will wake up to that reality in eternity the Lord is near his kingdom is near be patient stand firm set your hearts on the thing that matters the one who matters because the

[16 : 50] Lord is near you see we read in the first verse of Hebrews chapter 11 that faith faith is confidence confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see and that's what we're called and we're reminded of particularly during our events we think of this theme of preparing and getting ready it's what we're called to do to live and wait patiently not in a passive way but in an active way engaging with the challenges around us praying about what's going on in our lives about what's going on in the world being poised being ready being engaged getting ready to hasten that kingdom that is coming that we can't control but God can and God will and trusting that all the while we can't see him he is there and he is near I want to leave this image with you it's taken to prayer there's going to be some music in a moment and during that time

I'm going to invite us to just pray during that music as it comes up on the screens but the image that I think is a helpful one for discipleship at any time but particularly as we think during Advent of this theme of waiting trusting in that which we cannot see expecting patiently and the promises of God I want to share this with you it comes from the world of developmental psychology particularly somebody called Jean Piaget who wrote about something called object permanence you see when we're first born when we first come into this world we haven't learned to differentiate between what we can see and what we can't see and what just simply doesn't exist and so for the early stages of life a baby when they see something and then it's taken out of sight as far as they're concerned it

doesn't exist before object permanence has surfaced now when we've acquired object permanence in our developmental journey and the very early stages of growing up it's then that we realise that just because something is out of sight it hasn't ceased to exist and you can see this in a young child when if you take something a toy for example and you put it underneath a blanket the child that has acquired object permanence will go looking for it they'll try to find it because they know that even though it's out of sight it's still there somewhere and that's why games like peekaboo are really helpful in developing in coaching this object permanence in the mind of a young child well what I want to suggest for all of us is that when it comes to our relationship with

God do we need to learn or rather relearn a new dimension of object permanence to learn to understand that just because he may be out of sight he's not out of action he's there he's here be patient then stand firm because the Lord is near let's pray Lord your word teaches us that faith faith is that confidence in what we hope for and assurance of what we do not see help us to mature and to develop that trust in the kingdom that we may not be able to see whatever is going on in our lives right now and whatever is going on within that wider world may we become ever more patient and ever more firm setting our hearts on you knowing that you are near we hold this prayer before you now in Jesus name

Amen Amen Bluetooth You could have come like a forest fire With the power of heaven in your flame But you came like a winter snow Quiet and soared and slow Falling from the sky in the night To the earth below We could have swept in like a tidal of light Or in an ocean to ravage our hearts You could have come through like a roaring flood To wipe away the waves we've scarred But you came like a winter snow Yes you did You were quiet, you were soft and slow Falling from the sky in the night To the earth below Oh no

[24 : 20] Your voice wasn't in a bush burning No Your voice wasn't in a rushing wind It was still, it was small It was hidden You came like a winter snow Quiet and soft and slow Falling from the sky in the night To the earth below Falling To the earth below You came falling From the sky in the night To the earth below Lord God

Lord God, we bring you our prayers We bring you our past, our present and our future Help us to trust in you Help us to be patient To stand firm And to know that you are near Now and every day In Jesus' name Amen