

Patience waiting for Jesus' return

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[0 : 00] The first reading is from Mark chapter 13, verse 32. But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

Be on guard, keep awake, for you do not know when that time will come. It is like a man going on a journey when he leaves home and put his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake.

Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning, lest he come suddenly and find you asleep.

And what I say to you, I say to all, stay awake. So our second reading is James chapter 5, that's on page 1218 in the Church Bibles.

So James chapter 5, starting at verse 7, and we'll go through to verse 12. Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord.

[1 : 23] 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 remain 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.

Well, do keep that passage open. Benji's prayed already. Everything you'll need for the sermon will be on the screen, or if you've got a printout on the server sheet.

[2 : 35] I guess many of us were brought up to value patience. Patience is a virtue, goes the saying. But perhaps I'm not the only one to think that it's hard work.

We teach our children to be patient, and yet children are often the cause of our impatience.

Perhaps the advance of technology has meant we are less patient as a society.

Remember the days of dial-up internet, or waiting for it to connect, or waiting for someone to finish on the internet so you could use the phone. Young people now looking quite confused.

But nowadays, if it's not super fast fibre optic, it's not worth having. Perhaps you're a teenager here, and you just want your Christmas presents now, rather than two weeks' time.

And I guess we've all felt the frustration of temporary traffic lights. You see, some struggles with patience are fairly trivial like that. But patience is especially a struggle in hard times, isn't it?

[3 : 44] When we go through physical, mental, or emotional suffering and pain. When we suffer injustice or persecution at school or at work.

And in hard times, there is a real danger of giving up on Jesus altogether. Feeling that God either doesn't care, or he's just not sorting things out quickly enough.

Well, that is the situation into which this letter of James is written. You see, we're diving in right near the end, so let's get our bearings a bit. But I put some verses on the screen to help us.

The opening verses tell us that this group of Christians have been scattered all over the ancient world. You see, there are two to twelve tribes in a dispersion. There was some persecution that had broken out against the Jerusalem church that we can read about in Acts chapter 8.

And so they're forced to leave behind friends, family, livelihoods. And so they're going through the normal trials of life. Various trials of sickness, loneliness, bereavement.

[4 : 51] But then also poverty and oppression that comes from their persecution. And one of the key verses for the letter is chapter 1, verse 12 on the screen. You see, James is worried that in the midst of the trials and struggles that his readers face, they might take their eyes off the prize.

They might not remain steadfast. And instead, give up on that heavenly prize of the crown of life that awaits them when Jesus returns.

And so with this danger of hard times and struggles leading to giving up in the Christian life, what do James' readers need to hear?

And what do we ourselves need to hear this morning? Well, James' answer is our first big point. Endure patiently because Jesus the judge is coming again.

Have a look down at verse 7 with me. Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. The coming of the Lord here is a sense of a king or emperor on an official visit.

[6 : 01] And so right away, just as a little subtle way, James is reminding us that the true emperor in our world, the true president, is no Caesar, president or prime minister, but the Lord Jesus. And the one who was born a king in humility will come again in glory.

And we see that Jesus' return is the controlling motivation for patience here. Verse 8, the coming of the Lord is at hand. Verse 9, the judge is standing at the door.

The motivation to be patient in the face of suffering is because Jesus is coming back to judge. And the coming of Jesus is not just an event for just the Christians, but the whole world.

Now, he will bring the judgment of all sin, the righting of all wrongs. And so in the face of suffering, James calls his readers to patience, not revolution, because justice will be done in the end.

James illustrates his point by turning to the farmer. Have a look again at verse 7. 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.

[7 : 19] One of the joys of visiting my family in East Anglia is being stuck behind tractors. You'd think it'd be different in December, but no. They're there working all year round.

And patient endurance characterised a driver stuck behind a tractor, but it also characterised the life of a farmer. You see, in that part of the world, rain came at two parts of the year.

The early rains came in the autumn, just as the crop is planted. And the late rains came in the spring, just as the crop is ripening for harvest. And between those times, the farmer could do nothing at all to accelerate the process of harvest.

He had to wait. He knew the rain would come, and with it the harvest. He just needed to exercise patience, waiting with hope and confidence.

And it's the same for James' readers in waiting for Jesus. And yet there's more to it. Because James is not just appealing to nature, but to God's character.

[8 : 28] Knowing how well his Jewish readers knew the Old Testament, James could have been confident that they would have picked up on the connection to Deuteronomy 11. I put the verse on the handout on the screen. He will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil.

The regular rains is an expression of God's faithfulness. And James is saying, just as God has shown his faithfulness year on year in sending the rain in its time, so too he will show his faithfulness in bringing justice at the right time.

So just as farmers wait on the Lord patiently for rain, we are to wait patiently on the Lord for Jesus and the salvation and justice he will bring.

God is faithful. He has shown himself in the past and will continue to do so in the future. Well then, with that in mind, James then drills down into some specific applications.

Because Jesus is certainly coming, verse 8 he says, establish your hearts. Patience is not passive.

[9 : 43] My three-year-old, a couple of weeks ago, he was sitting on the stairs, just after we put decorations up, and he was looking at the front door and said, James, what are you doing?

He said, I'm waiting for Father Christmas. Looking at the front door, I said, you'll be waiting a while. So I went and made a cup of tea and had 10 minutes to myself. But patience is not passive, is my point.

You would have done the same. Waiting, waiting, does not mean inactivity like that. You see, while waiting for harvest, the farmer would do everything he could to ensure the health of the crop, clearing the weeds, clearing the weeds, adding the fertiliser, and so on.

And in the same way, Christians await the justice to come, where we are to do everything we can to strengthen our faith in Jesus each day.

Fixing our hearts and our minds on that future day. So often it's easy to believe, isn't it, that Jesus is coming back in our heads.

[10:46] But then our next thought to be, yeah, but probably not for a long while. And I've just got so much to do. Christmas is coming. And when we start to think like that, our hearts do not become established.

We don't make sure our hearts are in the right place today. As we saw in our first passage, Jesus could come at any time.

And James emphasises that too, the urgency. We are to establish our hearts because, verse 8, the coming of the Lord is at hand. The bulk of all that needed to happen beforehand, as indeed happened, he's saying.

Jesus came in his incarnation at the first Christmas. He died. He rose again. He's now exalted to the right hand of the Father. And nothing else remains on God's calendar before Jesus' return.

And so for those of us who wouldn't call ourselves Christians here this morning, these verses are a real warning, aren't they? The judge is indeed standing at the door. He could come back at any moment.

[11:57] The handle is about to turn. All rise, sentence announced. And yet the delay is part of God's compassion and mercy to our world, enabling people to come back to him as their saviour before they meet him as their judge.

There is still time to come back to him. But the clock is ticking. And we might not even get to Christmas Day. So this morning we've been thinking about Advent.

It is a time for looking back to the first coming of Jesus. We have our calendars at home. But even more importantly, it's about looking forward to the second coming of Jesus, in glory, at the end of time.

And having that firmly fixed in our minds each day leads to establishing our hearts with patient endurance influence in the Christian life. The coming of Jesus in James' day was near.

It is still near for us today, 2,000 years later. The handle could turn. James also then applies this to how we speak.

[13:11] Verse 9. Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged. Behold, the judge is standing at the door. I guess it's all too easy when facing ongoing pressure and injustice to turn against one another.

It might be that we grumble because when we compare our own experience to that of other Christians around us and sense that they know little of what we're going through or that they're having an easier time of things than us and it can feel unfair.

Or perhaps we're conscious of other people facing trials and we feel they're not responding with the grace we think they should show. And implicitly, we assume we would show in their situation.

And that leads to grumbling. And again, it's the nearness of the Lord that is our motivation to live rightly. The judge is at the door. It's hard to imagine him nearer, is it?

The handle is about to turn. And so we are to speak to one another, James says, in such a way that we would not be ashamed of the Lord Jesus himself being within earshot. He's in that room there.

[14:25] He can hear everything that's going on inside. In a sense, having this attitude in our hearts and mouths is readying ourselves for eternity with each other.

Just as we prepare for Christmas now, we prepare for future glory now in our hearts, in our words.

And this matters because James is clear in verse 9 that Jesus judges such grumbling.

That such words are assessed by him. Now, we're not to worry that our standing before God is threatened. Jesus uses the word brothers throughout to show that these are genuine believers.

But there is a clear implication that Jesus is greatly displeased with us when we grumble against one another. Now, yes, there will be times we have to challenge one another on a matter of godliness.

And that's not ruled out by this verse. We may have been wronged by someone and they may be guilty of sin. And yet, we can ultimately leave it to the Lord.

[15:35] because we'll all be judged one day too. And so James has a clear instruction to oppressed and suffering Christians. Endure patiently because Jesus the judge is coming again.

His nearness prompts us to establish our hearts and care for one another in how we speak. And then James underlines his point by giving two examples for us to learn from.

So the second point, follow the biblical examples of patient endurance. Now, it's striking. In giving biblical examples right from the go, James is saying what they're facing whilst being hard is certainly not new.

It's possible to feel as though comfort and life going well are normal in the Christian life. And that hardship is abnormal and a sign that things are going wrong in our Christian lives.

But the Bible nowhere leads us to have that expectation. That suffering of one kind or another is normal for the people of God and it always has been.

[16:45] It's not a sign that things have gone wrong, but a sign that things have gone normal. That suffering Christians, we are not blazing a new trail, but travelling a well-worn path.

And James also encourages us that patience in suffering, well, it's not impossible by giving these examples. We are to be encouraged by seeing how followers of God in their past have remained faithful under trial and that will lead us to spur on.

They have done the very thing James has called us to do. It's possible to be patient and suffer. So the first, James points to the endurance of the prophets.

Have a look at verse 10. As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. James doesn't say which prophets he means.

In one sense he's saying, pick a prophet, any prophet. Just as he was martyred in Acts 7, Stephen said, I'll put the verse on the screen, which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?

[17:54] We think of Isaiah that we've just spent this term thinking about, spent nearly his entire ministry preaching to people who didn't listen. And tradition has it, he was sawn in two for his trouble.

Or the prophet Jeremiah who was betrayed by his own family, beaten, put in stocks, threatened with death and thrown down a well. Yet through all this, Isaiah and Jeremiah remained faithful to their calling, demonstrating the very patience that James has been commending.

And not only have they responded to the suffering with patience, but James reminds us that they spoke in the name of the Lord. They carried on doing their job and they ministered to God's people while they were suffering rather than waiting until suffering stopped.

And so to those of us prone to using our tongues to grumble against each other, this is a wonderful encouragement to put them to better use. Now what James is calling us to do therefore is not novel nor impossible.

And it does not mean we're incapable of either serving or witnessing now. And just as the hope of the first coming of the Lord sustained the prophets back in their day, well so now the second coming of the Lord can sustain us.

[19:13] God will act when the time is right so we can endure patiently and you continue to serve him. James' second example then is the steadfastness of Job.

Verse 11, Behold, we consider those blessed who remain 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.

Job was so patient it's become an English proverb, patience like Job. Now we may know something of Job's biography. He was living a life of happiness, luxury and faith when it was all taken away from him.

His whole world began to fall apart. He lost his wealth, his health, his children. His friends arrived and accused him of committing crimes that he hadn't committed. And yet through all that physical, mental, emotional torment, Job remained steadfast.

And what sustained Job through all of those trials was the hope of what God would do in the future. Some may remember these words from Handel's Messiah if not from Job 19.

[20:29] For I know that my Redeemer lives and that the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God.

Job had nothing yet left to cling to in his life and despite the whole world preaching in his ear, he remained steadfast. And Christians today, we are to do the same.

We are to endure patiently with our hope and our hearts set on the future. Jesus will return to judge and establish our hearts and expectation.

But James isn't done yet because he has another application about how we speak. Again, he says, take care in how we speak. If one mark of godly patience is what we don't say, we don't grumble, another mark of godly patience is having integrity in what we do say.

Have a look at verse 12. But above all, my brothers, do not swear either by heaven on 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.

[21 : 43] Often, we feel we have to say really when we mean something, don't we? No, I really mean it as opposed to just meaning it. So if you say you mean it, you don't mean it unless you say you really mean it and that means you really do mean it.

But we shouldn't need to emphasise the truthfulness of something we say because everything we say should be true and trustworthy.

No half-truths or exaggerations. At home, I have to make the concerted effort to avoid saying maybe to our children because it doesn't take long, does it, for a child to work out that when their parents say maybe, they actually mean no.

It's just that they don't want an argument. So in the face of real suffering though, it does seem quite trivial to be talking about our yeses and our nos. But I think we live in a world where the first thing to go under pressure is truth.

I think we've seen that in politics over the past week or so, haven't we? But a mark of faithful patience is that we care for one another by having integrity in what we say.

[22 : 53] And so then, as those who suffer, we need to remember that we are in the latest in the long line of God's people who have gone through trials and difficulties.

And we can look back to the examples God's word gives us of patience under pressure and endure. Because Jesus, the judge, is coming soon.

He is standing at the door. The handle could turn at any moment. And so we are to fully engage our hearts and our mouths in how the Lord would have us to live each day in the trials and all of life.

And so just as we close, Florence Chadwick was an accomplished long-distance swimmer. In 1952, she attempted to swim the 26 miles of coastline between Catalina Island and California coastline. After about 15 hours, a thick fog set in. Florence began to doubt her ability. And she told her mother in one of the boats alongside her that she couldn't, she didn't think she could make it.

[24 : 03] She swam for another hour before asking to be pulled out. Unable to see the coastline because of the fog. 16 hours, she was swimming. As she sat in the boat, she found out she had stopped swimming just one mile away from the finish line.

Brothers and sisters, it would be a great tragedy to give up on Jesus at the last moment before he returns. We can't see the future. In a sense, we are like in the fog.

And through suffering and injustice, James is saying there really is a danger of not persevering to the finish line. Well, two months later, Florence tried again.

The same thick fog set in, but this time she reached the finish line. And she said afterwards that she kept going because she had a mental image of the shoreline in her mind as she swam.

Well, for us, whether we suffer because of our Christian faith or because we just live in a fallen world, injustice, suffering, persecution, we are to have the image of the heavenly shoreline in our minds, establishing our hearts and minds each day, enduring patiently until he comes in all his glory and we receive the crown of life from God that awaits all those who love him.

[25 : 28] Let's pray together. Amen. Amen. Heavenly Father, we thank you that Jesus will come again. We thank you that you have promised it and you are faithful to your promises.

Please help us now in the brokenness, injustices, the hardships of life to persevere, fixing our hearts, our minds and our mouths on the coming of the Lord and the crown of life that is ours to come.

Amen. grief on death. Death of a sea