

Gaining Wait

James 5:7-11

We know that any text that starts off with the instruction, “Be patient...” isn’t going to be easy. We would rather James had written, “Be fulfilled, be overjoyed, be loved.” Almost anything other than, “Be patient.” Patience doesn’t come naturally to us, and we live in an “on demand” culture. We can get what we want when we want it at just the touch of a fingertip. Do you ever find yourself wanting the microwave to hurry up? Do you get frustrated waiting for a web page to load? Minute Rice and next-day delivery are not fast enough. Our hyper-connected society is creating a generation of people who can’t wait. A 23-year-old named Zack confesses, “Most of my generation has grown up not having to wait for anything.”ⁱ A Pew Research Center study found our “on demand” lives come at a price warning, “Negative side effects include a need for instant gratification and a loss of patience.”ⁱⁱ

We were talking about this struggle with patience a few weeks ago in our small group. Somebody remarked that they prayed for patience, but it takes too long. I know it’s a struggle for me. Just this week I was waiting to turn left at the corner of Banning and Hubble while taking Allison to school. There was a car in front of me who sat idly during several opportunities to go. As each window opened and then closed, I grew more and more infuriated. “What are you waiting for? A red carpet! Three cars could have made that turn. Ugh! What an idiot.” I realized that all my fussing and fuming wouldn’t get us anywhere any faster, and Allison is sitting right next to me, and I realize just what sort of example I’m setting.

It’s also not the life to which Jesus has called us. In some ways, James comes full circle here in chapter 5. James started out in chapter one calling us to perseverance in the midst of trials. Now, in chapter 5, he entreats us as a beloved brother, “be patient.” Don’t miss the tenderness, the concern and the love in his words. He uses the word “brothers” four times in six verses. This is the heart plea of family.

This is a call to gain wait. Not W-E-I-G-H-T, but W-A-I-T. But it’s more than a call to patience in general, while you’re waiting at the doctor’s office, or you’re longing for that long meeting to end. It’s a call to endure in the Christian life. It’s an assurance that the life-long struggle toward Christlikeness is worth it, and a reminder that our faithfulness is not forgotten.

It is a steadfast sticktoitiveness that doesn't quit though its tired, doesn't surrender though it's tempted, and gets back up after it has tripped and fallen.

James gives us three reasons we don't have to give up or give in.

I. It is worth the wait.

The first reason we can endure is that it is worth the wait. We can endure many things when we know the reward at the end will be worth it. The athlete endures tortuous hours of practice and workouts dreaming about the trophy and the championship. The entrepreneur sinks her life savings and slogs 15 hour days knowing that her product will be huge. The writer goes through countless drafts and dozens of rejection letters because he can imagine holding that first published book in his hands. There's a reason we get up day after day before the sun comes up. There's a reason we keep ordering the salad instead. There's a reason we squeeze our budgets every month just to put another couple hundred in savings. There's a reason we hit the gym three days a week even though we don't want to go. There's a reason we keep reading the assignments and turning our homework in. Because we believe the pain now will be worth the reward then. The struggle may be hard, and the road may be long, but James assures us that it will all be worth it in the end, and he uses a farming analogy to make his point.

These last few years we've been trying our hand at gardening. We've had some successes. I remember sitting down to a meal about three years ago, and we could say that we had grown or harvested everything on the table. That was very satisfying. But we've also had some very spectacular failures. One of the keys of successful gardening is patience, of waiting for nature to finish its work. That's hard. We want the fruit now. Several times we've jumped the gun and we've harvested too soon. When you pick your corn too soon, your cantaloupe too soon, it's not juicy or sweet. It looks good, but we bite into it, and everyone starts spitting it out.

James obviously had some experience in farming, because this is the imagery he uses in verse 7. *"See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains."*

Israel doesn't enjoy four seasons in the sense that we do. There are rainy seasons and there are dry seasons. The spring planting season starts off with rains in April followed by a long

dry spell. The summer months can be drought-like and would spell the end for any crop, but just before harvest come the fall rains of October. In the heat of August all seems lost, but the fall rains bring hope from disaster. The farmer plants his crops every spring knowing that the October rains will make worth the wait. We can endure the heat of scorching trials and the thorns and thistles of trying people, because as Peter says in Acts 3:20, times of refreshing will come from the presence of the Lord.

II. He is coming.

Why is it worth it? Because, James says, he is coming. He assures us that it worth enduring and persevering in life because he is coming. Two times in these verses he tells us he is coming. In verse 7, *“Be patient, then, brothers until the Lord’s coming,”* and again in verse 8, *“You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near.”* We can hold on and stand firm, because we know He is coming. Our Lord has not abandoned us to the trials and suffering of this world. He has a plan, and he is coming back. Knowing that He is coming makes all the difference.

In the closing days of the Civil War William Sherman drove his Union troops on their decisive march to the sea like a dagger through the heart of Georgia. Sherman advanced so quickly that traditional supply lines could not keep up. Key to his success was a small contingent of men guarding his rations at a fort on Kennesaw Mountain. Confederate General John Bell Hood attacked the fort and nearly overwhelmed the defenders. One-third of the Union troops had fallen, and J.M. Corse, the general in command was severely injured. He was about to hoist the white flag of surrender when a message came through the flagmen of the signal corps set up across a chain of mountains. General Sherman was 15 miles away. The message said, “Hold the fort; I am coming.” With that assurance, Corse’s troops held the fort until Sherman arrived. That’s our Lord’s message to us. “Hold the fort; I am coming.”

Let me ask you a question. What is the greatest reward of the Christian life? Will it be heaven— the streets of gold? Is it eternal life? Maybe it’s our resurrection bodies. As great as those things are, the greatest reward of the Christian life is Jesus himself. The greatest reward isn’t what Jesus gives us; it’s Jesus.

In the final two chapters of Revelation, John receives a vision of our eternal reward, life in new Jerusalem on the new earth. John describes his vision in such vivid and mysterious imagery. It's as if he's stretching human language beyond its limits. He is describing the indescribable. He's putting into words what mere language could never hold, and so he mixes metaphors and describes logical impossibilities. He says he is going to show us a radiant bride beautifully adorned for her husband, but instead what he shows us is a spectacular, bejeweled city. These are not the dingy streets and dark alleyways of the old earth. This is a city built of crystal, adorned with precious stones, and where even the streets are paved with pure gold. It's a city where there is no temple because God's presence fills the whole city, and yet God's people themselves are pillars in the temple (Rev. 3:12). It is described in dimensions that would cover entire seas and tower into outer space were it on our old earth.

Too many people read these fantastic descriptions and then get out their measuring tapes and calculators to determine just how many square miles we will have a piece. I suspect that when we do this we are missing the point. What is the point? Here's what God tells John after he first beholds the new Jerusalem,

Behold the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. – Revelation 21:3-4

Our reward is our Lord himself. All of this imagery points us to the outrageous beauty and amazing worth of that reality. John takes the most beautiful things, the most valuable things, the most precious things known to his world to paint a picture of how inconceivably glorious it will be for us to be with God.

I will never forget the moment my bride emerged from the doors of the church vestibule. She didn't just walk through the doors. She blossomed, and she radiated beauty all the way down the aisle. Her hair was wound and terraced intricately. Her white gown streamed from her curves as though her splendor could not be contained and simply overflowed. Flowers spilled from her hands held in front as though the very love of her heart was bursting forth. Yet all of her adornment was nothing more than a frame for the exquisite elegance of her face. In

that moment, she and I were the only ones in the room. Everything else faded from by view as it was overpowered by her beauty, and we had no choice but to bask in her glory.

Do you know who the bride is? Who is the bride of Christ in the New Testament? It's the church. All this stuff that John sees in Revelation 21 and 22 is a vivid picture of the church, of you and me and the body of Christ. This is how we will be. This is how God will see us. This is who we will be in His presence. This is who you are. No matter what you've done. No matter what's happened in your past. No matter how ugly this present life gets, if you endure, you are his radiant, stunning, beautiful bride, and that's how he will see you.

It's my opinion that all these descriptions of precious jewels and entire gates made of single pearls and streets of pure gold are all intended to describe the beauty and wonder of that moment, of our being in His presence. We can endure, because he is coming.

III. It has Been Done

Finally, James says we can endure, because it has been done. Others have done it. Others have gone before you, and they've walked down an even more difficult road, and they've endured. They made it. We all have times in our journeys when we think the climb is too steep, the way too narrow, or the obstacles too great. We all have times we feel like giving up, or going in a different direction.

James offers us two examples to encourage us. First, he mentions the prophets. This would be the Old Testament prophets—guys like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel. Since James was writing to Jewish Christians he wouldn't need to tell the stories of these prophets. Every Jewish boy and girl learned all about their lives from their earliest days of childhood. James is saying, "Remember what you learned about the prophets—what they went through, what they endured."

The book of Hebrews in Hebrews 11 describes the perseverance of the prophets.

³⁶ Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were put to death by stoning; they were sawed in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— ³⁸ the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.

³⁹ *These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised,* ⁴⁰ *since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.*

They were waiting for a blessing, and so they endured. They kept at it. The same blessing that made it worth it for them, is the same blessing that makes it worth it for you.

James offers a second example— Job— who endured the loss of everything but his life— his family, his home, his possessions, his health. It was all part of some sort of cosmic bet between Satan and God. However, Job was never allowed to peek behind the curtain to see what was going on. Job isn't the perfect example of patience for us because he quietly and passively endured. No, in fact, when you read Job, he doesn't seem all that patient. He complains to God, and he even argued with God. As Job confesses at the end, *"Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know (Job 42:3)."* But Job stuck it out. He held a steady resolve. He trusted God, even though he didn't understand God, and God declares that Job spoke of him what is right (Job 42:7, 8).

The patience God calls us to is not some sort of stoic resignation. It is not a denial of our pain or fear. It's a determination that persists in the relationship. We don't give up on God, because we know God won't give up on us. Like a committed marriage we are determined to stick with Him through thick and thin because we know he has purpose, and that he will bring about something wonderful. We know that no matter what happens there will be compassion and mercy at the end of the day. The grave will not have the last word. Sickness and disease will not have the last word. Anxiety and depression will not have the last word. Abuse and neglect will not have the last word. Unfaithfulness and abandonment will not have the last word. Failure and regret will not be the themes of the final chapter. The last word will always be the goodness and greatness of God.

James is all about taking our faith out of the box. Each week we've been taking something out of our box. Last week, it was our wallets and purses we took out of the box. This week it is something equally precious, our time. We must give our calendars over to God. Our days, our weeks, our months, our years. The faithful life is the one that grows day after day, month after month, year after year, page after page. We have to quit giving him just one or two squares from each week. Give him the whole thing, and be in the relationship for the long haul.

Earlier, I told the story of the Union troops holding the fort on Kennesaw mountain against overwhelming odds, because they had received the message from General Sherman, “Hold the fort; I am coming.” The story of this battle inspired one of the great hymn writers to write a hymn that used their valiant defense as a parable for the Christian life.

The hymn writer is Philip Bliss. He wrote such great hymns as *Hallelujah! What a Savior*, *Wonderful Words of Life*, and he wrote the tune to the beloved classic *It is Well with My Soul*. The song he wrote was simply called *Hold the Fort*.

1. Ho, my comrades, see the signal, waving in the sky!
Reinforcements now appearing, victory is nigh.
- Refrain:
“Hold the fort, for I am coming,” Jesus signals still;
Wave the answer back to Heaven, “By Thy grace we will.”
2. See the mighty host advancing, Satan leading on;
Mighty ones around us falling, courage almost gone!
 3. See the glorious banner waving! Hear the trumpet blow!
In our Leader’s Name we triumph over every foe.
 4. Fierce and long the battle rages, but our help is near;
Onward comes our great Commander, cheer, my comrades, cheer!

ⁱ Muther, Christopher (February 2, 2013) *Instant Gratification is Making Us Perpetually Impatient*. BostonGlobe.com Retrieved October 14, 2015 from <https://www.bostonglobe.com/lifestyle/style/2013/02/01/the-growing-culture-impatience-where-instant-gratification-makes-crave-more-instant-gratification/q8tWDNGeJB2mm45fQxtTQP/story.html>

ⁱⁱ Anderson, Janna & Rainie, Lee (Feb. 29, 2012) *Millennials will Benefit and Suffer Due to their Hyperconnected Lives*. Pew Research Center. Accessed October 14, 2015 from <http://www.pewinternet.org/2012/02/29/main-findings-teens-technology-and-human-potential-in-2020/>