

Suffering

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[0 : 00] Well, we've come to the end of our study of James. Admittedly, I have not expounded upon every passage as thoroughly as I could have, but the primary goal has been to give a good sense of the book as a whole, and I pray I've accomplished at least that much.

You might think of this series as a nine-part introduction to the book of James. So after today, maybe you can study it on your own and glean even more from the Lord's brother.

There's plenty of wisdom to be found in this epistle. If you will, go with me to James chapter 5. James chapter 5. I'll read from verse 7 to the end of the letter.

Therefore, brothers, be patient until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth and is patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains.

You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, because the Lord's coming is near. Brothers, do not complain about one another so that you will not be judged.

[1 : 18] Look, the judge stands at the door. Brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the Lord's name as an example of suffering and patience. See, we count as blessed those who have endured.

You have heard of Job's endurance and have seen the outcome that the Lord brought about. The Lord is compassionate and merciful. Above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath, but let your yes mean yes and your no mean no, so that you won't fall under judgment.

Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray. Is anyone cheerful? He should sing praises. Is anyone among you sick?

He should call for the elders of the church, and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is very powerful in its effect.

[2 : 32] Elijah was a human being as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the land. Then he prayed again, and the sky gave rain, and the land produced its fruit.

My brothers, if any among you strays from the truth and someone turns him back, let that person know that whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.

Now, if someone were attempting to expound upon James more thoroughly, he would probably require at least four weeks to get through the rest of this.

Someone like Martin Lloyd-Jones would probably require another four months, but we'll cover the remainder all today. As you can see, James deals with four distinct subjects here.

First, he speaks about waiting patiently when we're suffering. Second, he warns against swearing oaths. Third, he speaks about the effectiveness of prayer.

[3 : 43] And fourth, he encourages Christians to disciple one another. But you'll also notice that at least three of these subjects fall right in line with some of the things we've read previously in this letter.

He's already talked about suffering. That's how the letter began. Again, he said plenty about our tongues and how we use them. And he's even spoken briefly about the effectiveness of prayer. You may remember when he said all the way back in chapter one, if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God and it will be given to him. So in a sense, James is merely circling back to previous themes of this letter, delving a bit deeper into them and providing a kind of resolution to the letter.

As for the last part of this, verses 19 and 20, well, we'll talk about it soon enough, but it's a very, very appropriate ending to this letter.

But we'll come to that. As for the matter of suffering, we've already gotten a sense of what these early Christians were going through. James doesn't make any direct reference to physical persecution, but he makes it clear that they were suffering.

[5 : 03] And he primarily blames wealthy people for their suffering. In chapter two, he writes, don't the rich oppress you and drag you into court? Don't they blaspheme the good name that was invoked over you?

And there's nothing particularly surprising about that. Jesus himself frequently warned his disciples that they would suffer at the hands of the unbelieving world.

For example, he said, a servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. That's to be expected.

But the situation is even worse than that, because these early Christians, to whom James is writing, are not suffering at the hands of only the unbelieving world around them.

Throughout this letter, James has rebuked even people inside of the church for the ways they're treating their own brothers and sisters in Christ. They're neglecting, even cheating the poor among them.

[6 : 09] They're judging them. They're defaming them. They're showing favoritism and partiality toward the more affluent among them. And you'll remember from last time that James issued a very harsh warning to them.

Come now, you rich people. Weep and wail over the miseries that are coming on you. Your wealth has rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire.

James essentially says to them, your behavior is no different than the behavior of the unredeemed, hell-bound world around us. If you continue down this path, you will surely meet a dreadful fate.

So repent. Humble yourselves before God and repent. But as we've talked about, James is really writing to a mixed audience.

So he has something to say to the rich oppressors among them, but he also has something to say to the impoverished oppressed. And it's the oppressed who become his focus as he moves into verse 7 of chapter 5.

[7 : 22] Now he begins with the word, therefore. Therefore. Therefore. Which indicates that what he's about to say has a direct connection to what he has just finished saying.

And that might seem a little confusing at first, because he's essentially speaking to two very different groups of people. But there is a connection here.

You see, to the wealthy oppressors, he says judgment is coming if you don't repent and submit to God. And because judgment is coming, and because justice will ultimately prevail, therefore, I say to the oppressed, be patient until the Lord's coming.

Do you see that connection? In other words, he says to the oppressed, the Lord will return. Things may seem very dire now. We have weeds growing up among the wheat.

You're suffering terribly at the hands of both unbelievers and so-called believers. And maybe you wonder whether there is any justice in this world. But please, hang on.

[8 : 38] It won't be like this forever. However, the Lord is coming back, and when he does, he will make all things right. As Paul said, for I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory that is going to be revealed to us.

I wonder whether James has the book of Ecclesiastes in the back of his mind as he writes this. He was clearly influenced by Proverbs.

But I wonder whether Ecclesiastes was on his mind as well because he's drawing a very similar conclusion. If you're familiar with Ecclesiastes, you know that the so-called preacher, the Koheleth of the book, he wrestles in part with the injustice he sees all around him.

Righteous people suffer. Wicked people prosper. And the end is the same for everyone. We all die. So the preacher is basically asking, how do we make sense of all of this?

How do we live in light of all of this? What are we supposed to do? What are we supposed to think in a world that is so marred by terrible injustices?

[9 : 52] Well, here's the conclusion to the book. When all has been heard, the conclusion of the matter is this. Fear God and keep his commands because this is for all humanity.

For God will bring every act to judgment, including every hidden thing, whether good or evil. Now, most people reading that, they would think, okay, I understand why we should fear God and keep his commandments.

Life doesn't always make sense to us, so it stands to reason that we need to trust God, trust his will, because he's in control of it all. But why does the book end with a reminder that God will bring every act into judgment?

What does that have to do with anything? Well, I believe that's meant, in part at least, to be a comfort to God's people, especially those who are suffering unjustly.

Both James and Ecclesiastes say to us, don't lose heart. The Lord knows your trials. He sees the injustice. Now, he has his reasons for letting it persist, but he will not let it go on forever.

[11:06] Brothers and sisters, you will be vindicated. Everything will be made right one day. The wicked will be judged, and the righteous will be redeemed.

In fact, you'll notice that James uses two designations for Christ here. In verse 7, he calls him Lord. He is our master. We submit to him and to his will.

Then in verse 9, he calls Jesus the judge. The judge. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5, we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may be repaid for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

In short, justice is coming. When Christ the judge returns, he will make everything right. In the meantime, James implores suffering Christians to be patient until the Lord's coming.

Be patient. And that's really an encouragement to do at least three things. The first is to be patient. Don't become anxious. Don't try to take matters into your own hands.

[12:19] Just wait on the Lord. Wait patiently. The second encouragement here is to trust in the plan of God. Right? I quoted this last time, but as the book of Proverbs says, trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not rely on your own understanding.

In all your ways, acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight. Trust the plan of God. And third, we should realize that we are not waiting aimlessly.

This is the great part. The Lord has told us how the story ends. We know exactly what we're waiting for. James says, be patient until the Lord's coming.

We're looking for the next arrival of Christ. In other words, we're waiting patiently, we're trusting the plan of God, but we're doing so with our eyes fixed on Christ.

Every moment of every day, we are waiting on the edge of our seats, anticipating his arrival at any moment. And this anticipation should consume us.

[13:30] It should drive us. And it should certainly encourage us. Jesus himself provides an example of that. Earlier this week, I preached at a funeral and I talked about how Jesus faced unquantifiable, inexpressible evil.

Frankly, it was the worst trouble to ever torture a human soul. And yet, he humbled himself under God's mighty hand, knowing that the Father would exalt him at the proper time.

And here's what we read in Hebrews 12. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

For the joy that lay before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. At the funeral, I said, Jesus wholeheartedly believed that the Father's promise was even more certain than any difficulty that lay before him.

He was sure of it. And the same is true for God's people. But see, we have to look beyond the trials that are right there in front of us. And I know how difficult that can be to do, but we have to keep our eyes fixed on Christ.

[14:50] He's coming. Keep watching. He's coming. As James says, strengthen your hearts because the Lord's coming is near. Do you see it?

And to illustrate this point, James uses the simple illustration of a farmer. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth and is patient with it until it receives the early and late rains.

In the region of Palestine, the early rains came around October or November during the planting season. The late rains came just before harvest in March or April.

So, as every farmer knows, there's plenty of waiting in between, a lot of trusting in the Lord in between, but the waiting is worth it because once the wait is over, the farmer gets his precious fruit. Now, the temptation for these Christians who are suffering unjustly is to begin complaining. Right? That's the most natural thing for us to do, it seems.

[15 : 57] So, James says, this is verse 9, Brothers, do not complain about one another so that you will not be judged. So, you'll notice that they're not necessarily complaining about needing to wait.

They're complaining about each other. They're grumbling against one another in the church. Now, on the one hand, we can understand why this might happen.

They're being mistreated even by people within the church. So, of course, they're tempted to complain. On the other hand, if they let themselves become bitter and resentful, then that divide between them becomes even greater.

And furthermore, they would be guilty of some of the same sins that they're complaining about.

Favoritism, judging one another, possibly defaming one another, and so on.

So, James says, don't let this happen. Look, the judge stands at the door. Leave it to him. Just wait for him.

[17 : 10] Then he reminds the churches that they are not the first of God's people to suffer unjustly. We tend to think of ourselves as always being in a unique situation.

No one can understand what I'm going through. He says, take the prophets who spoke in the Lord's name as an example of suffering and patience. See, we count as blessed those who have endured. Remember that James is writing to Jewish Christians. They know the Old Testament, and they know that Israel's history is replete with people rejecting God's prophets, rejecting his messengers. In fact, they were still rejecting God's prophets in the New Testament. Jesus came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.

Moses dealt with their rejection. Elijah dealt with it. Jeremiah seemed to deal with it throughout his entire ministry, and many others faced all kinds of suffering from David to Ezekiel to Hosea to Daniel.

[18 : 20] John the Baptist, that last and greatest prophet. He died in prison. Yet, we don't look back at their examples and think to ourselves, why didn't these guys put up a fight?

Why didn't they try to better their situations? Why didn't they complain more? We don't think that.

No, we look back at them and we say, wow, look at their patience.

Look how faithfully they endured their trials, trusting in the Lord every step of the way. Consider what the author of Hebrews says about them.

This is from Hebrews 11. These all died in faith, although they had not received the things that were promised. But they saw them from a distance, greeted them, and confessed that they were foreigners and temporary residents on the earth.

Now, those who say such things make it clear they are seeking a homeland. If they were thinking about where they came from, they would have had an opportunity to return.

[19 : 26] Think of, you know, Israel in the wilderness after they left Egypt. But now, they desire a better place, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.

Do you see how they were able to endure their trials? They did so by relying on the promises of God, looking beyond their trials, looking beyond their present circumstances.

When they were in the thick of their troubles, they said, I'm okay because I'm only here temporarily. God has promised me something far better, so I will keep my eyes on His promises, fixed on what's to come, not on what's happening right here, right now.

Just like Jesus, for the joy that lay before them, they endured whatever cross they were made to bear, despising the shame. James says, see, we count as blessed those who have endured.

Why? Why would we call anyone blessed who had to suffer so much? Well, as the author of Hebrews said, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.

[20 : 50] In the end, the rewards are greater than anything this world could ever offer us. Next, James draws our attention to Job.

You have heard of Job's endurance and have seen the outcome that the Lord brought about. The Lord is compassionate and merciful. Notice the outcome of Job's story, he says.

Consider the purpose of his suffering. What did it accomplish? Well, we could list a few potential outcomes. It proved his faith was genuine, didn't it?

I would argue that his faith was actually strengthened throughout the ordeal. And in the end, we see God bless him even more abundantly than he had in the beginning.

He had a great life beforehand, but here's how the book of Job ends. The Lord blessed the last part of Job's life more than the first. And as James thinks about the outcome of Job's terrible suffering,

he concludes that the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

[22 : 03] He can't help but to reflect on God's character. Despite all appearances, our suffering does not mean God is distant and uncaring.

It's just the opposite. James uses the word compassionate, which could be literally translated into many bowels.

Many bowels. Today, we might say God has a big heart. For the Jews, though, the deepest emotions, they rise up from the bowels. They rise up from the stomach.

In other words, God has a tremendous capacity for compassion and for mercy. He hasn't forgotten about his suffering people. He sees it.

He cares. But he also says to us, I have a purpose in all of this. Be patient. It won't be like this for long.

[23 : 01] Now, as we move into part two, if you will, I want you to imagine James setting down his pen for a moment. He takes a breath.

He thinks about everything he's already written in this letter as he considers how best to finish this letter. And his mind keeps going back to this issue that he has touched on in every single chapter and the one he really hammered in chapter three.

The tongue is a fire. The tongue, a world of unrighteousness, is placed among our members. It stains the whole body, sets the course of life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

And as he thinks about this, he again wants to stress how vital it is that we control our tongues. In fact, he says, above all, that is above all else, my brothers, do not swear either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath.

Of everything he has said in this epistle, he wants to emphasize this, above all, he says. Why?

Well, as we've talked about, it is because nothing reveals our hearts as accurately or readily as our tongues.

[24 : 22] Now, James isn't talking about using profane language here. That's not what he means by swearing. But I remember talking to a colleague of mine who was a little bothered because a pastor friend of his had come to him and said, you know, you've got to stop cursing.

He needed to take control of his tongue a little better. And like many people, my colleague thought they're just words. Surely a few curse words are the least of God's concerns. words.

But, I guess you could argue, yes, they are just words. But in another sense, as I told him, words matter a great deal to God because our words are reflections of our hearts.

If you want to gauge where your heart is, listen to how you speak. And maybe that's especially true when no one is around to hear you speak. In Ephesians 4, the Apostle Paul says, no foul language should come from your mouth, but only what is good for building up someone in need so that it gives grace to those who hear.

And don't grieve God's Holy Spirit. You are sealed by him for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, anger, and wrath, shouting, and slander be removed from you along with all malice.

[25 : 43] And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another just as God also forgave you in Christ. So in fact, our words matter a great deal.

Now in this case, James is talking about taking an oath. In a time when you really didn't have written contracts, a verbal oath could serve as a binding contract between two people.

And if someone violated their oath, they were liable to judgment. Now I don't believe James is prohibiting us here from ever taking an oath or ever making a promise.

The issue is making a promise flippantly or insincerely. The issue is making a promise and not keeping that promise.

That's why he says let your yes mean yes and your no mean no so that you won't fall under judgment. And it doesn't matter if the promise was made to God or if it was made to a stranger.

[26 : 50] It doesn't matter if the promise was a wedding vow in a church or one made in casual conversation to a colleague at work crossing your fingers behind your back.

That won't save you. Let your yes mean yes and your no mean no. Whether you swear by heaven or by earth or by any other oath.

Don't forget what this entire epistle is about. James is calling us to be people of integrity.

Wholeheartedly devoted to God and now he reminds us that we should be people of integrity also in how we speak.

And this is relevant to everything he has said. Think back to chapter 1. If anyone thinks he is religious without controlling his tongue his religion is useless and he deceives himself. What was he talking about there? Was he merely suggesting that I don't know people who maybe say mean things to one another their religion is vain?

[28 : 08] I think it's more than that. I think the issue is that they are talking like disciples of Christ. They are leading everyone to believe they are disciples of Christ but they are not living like disciples of Christ.

And by making the mere claim that they have allegiance to Christ they are taking an oath before God and before the church but their yes does not mean yes.

this is a sobering warning for those who claim to be Christians but their lives really do not reflect it. James says apart from repenting and genuinely submitting to God being obedient doers of the word and not hearers only you are liable to God's judgment for perpetually breaking this all important vow that you are speaking with your mouths to be faithful singularly devoted to God and our Lord Jesus Christ when in fact your yes does not mean yes your allegiance is not there despite what you say now with that final warning offered James here returns to the matter of suffering in part three of the text again he's thinking about those who are enduring trials and unsurprisingly he encourages them to pray is anyone among you suffering he should pray but of course he doesn't stop there because prayer isn't reserved only for those who are suffering obviously the primary lesson of this passage is that prayer is effective but we need to be careful because it's easy enough to look at this text and think to ourselves

God will save us from every illness if only we pray but we need to keep the context in mind now it's certainly possible that James is thinking about people who are physically sick but the context just might suggest something a little different you see this word sick can mean physically sick it certainly can or it can mean weak physically or spiritually Hebrews uses this word in Hebrews 12 3 and to my knowledge this is the only other time this word is actually used in the New Testament in Hebrews 12 3 it says consider him who endured such hostility from sinners against himself so that you won't grow weary and give up and that particular meaning seems to fit the context better thinking that [31 : 11] James is talking about those than thinking that James is talking about those who are physically ill after all he's writing to believers who are undoubtedly spiritually weakened and wearied by the hardships they're enduring now as a side note if James is talking about physical sickness here I don't believe he's suggesting that God will inevitably save every sick person as long as we pray for them with enough faith and I say that because this passage isn't given to us in a vacuum we have to consider everything scripture says and the bible simply does not teach that God will heal every illness if only we have enough faith James himself has already drawn our attention to saints of the past who suffered tremendously and many of them did not receive any reprieve they suffered right up until their deaths personally

I'm inclined to believe that James is talking about spiritually weak and weary believers here and he says he should call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord the prayer of faith will save the sick person and the Lord will raise him up if he has committed sins he will be forgiven therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another so that you may be healed now I know our minds want to jump right into the details of this we likely have many questions about what James says here why call the elders of the church are their prayers more effective what's the significance of the oil is that literal or is that symbolic if literal what does it represent how do confessions work are we supposed to stand up each week and name all of our sins but let's pause here let's just take a step back from it and see the passage as a whole what is

James getting at better yet what does this passage have to do with the rest of the letter well James is clearly writing to fractured churches the churches are fractured from one person to the next and individual members of the church are fractured within themselves many of them are double-minded to some degree or another they are fractured in heart they're inconsistent in their conduct their loyalty is torn and inevitably sin is involved here so with that in mind what do you suppose James is getting at here well I hope I've made it clear enough that James is not writing this letter to condemn anyone instead he wants nothing more than to lead those who are fractured in heart to restoration he wants to see their hearts healed he wants to see the churches healed and here he says prayer and confession these are two solid means of accomplishing that when the weary pray

God will strengthen them he may not take away all of their troubles but he will provide grace to see them through and when we confess our sins to one another even the fractures among members can begin to heal we say to one another brother I've sinned brother I've sinned against you listen to how J.B.

Phillips paraphrases the text believing prayer will save the weary man the Lord will restore him and any sins that he has committed will be forgiven you should get into the habit of admitting your sins to each other and praying for each other so that if weariness comes to you you may be healed then Phillips says tremendous power is made available through a good man's earnest prayer and I like that it's not that the prayer itself has power this is not an incantation or some witch's spell prayer is simply the means by which we can draw upon God's power it's an act of humble submission to God isn't it we're confessing in prayer that we need his help and Elijah is offered as an example of this this takes us back to 1 Kings chapter 17

[36 : 11] Elijah was a human being as we are and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain and for three years and six months it did not rain on the land then he prayed again and the sky gave rain and the land produced its fruit now in case we think that Elijah's prayer was answered only because he was God's special prophet James says no he was a human being like the rest of us no different as far as that goes but he prayed earnestly literally he prayed with prayer he prayed seriously he prayed faithfully he prayed believing God could answer even an extraordinary request like stopping and starting the rain obviously if a prayer can accomplish that surely

God can heal our fractured hearts lastly we come to the fourth and final part of the text my brothers if any among you strays from the truth and someone turns him back let that person know that whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and cover a multitude of sins now I said earlier that this is a very appropriate ending to the letter James shows us once again that condemnation is the furthest thing from his mind his heart aches for these people he wants nothing more than to see them repent he wants nothing more than to see everyone healed and he kind of turns to those who remain loyal to God they remain singularly devoted and says we're not trying to pluck out the weeds here that's not the point of this we're not trying to drive anyone away

I know how tempted you are to grumble about those who maybe are mistreating you even in the church I know you're feeling weary because of them but brothers our aim is to restore our aim is to lead all of us together to genuine wholeness in every way possible and this is also important because you'll notice that James he's not telling them to be altogether passive as they're mistreated here clearly he does not want them to avenge themselves but he does want them to do something namely he wants them to be active proactive even in leading others toward repentance and quite possibly salvation again James is writing to a mixed audience so he's writing to sincere believers who are mixed with double-minded believers who are mixed with professing believers who may not be believers at all and regardless he says to them whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins i mean is there a better way to fulfill the royal law that's how

James referred to that second great command that says love your neighbor as yourself the most loving thing we could ever do for anyone is care about them beyond the superficial go much deeper the most loving thing we can do for anyone is care about their eternal souls to want nothing more than to see them reconciled to God and saved and as James said in chapter two it isn't enough to say we care about them that's not sufficient we have to actually do something when we see someone wandering away from the truth we come alongside them you know we put that arm around them and we say brother sister I'm concerned about you I love you despite what you may have done to me

I love you and I want to help and James has proven himself to be a great example of this for those who say the book of James is all law and no gospel they must be reading a different book for all of James criticisms and rebukes how many times does he insert the word brothers into this letter I can tell you the answer is 15 15 times he says brothers or my brothers or best of all my dear brothers yes he rebukes them often and it's often with strong language but he never ceases to call them my dear brothers and he never treats them as though they're a lost cause instead what did he do in chapter 4 he reminds them that

[41 : 46] God's grace is greater than all our sins there's hope in Christ and in God's grace and so in the end he encourages everyone in the churches to have the same heart toward one another he

doesn't say give up you know some people are just too stubborn too hard hearted forget about them kick them out no he very clearly says don't give up on one another don't turn your back encourage one another support one another you can be instrumental in saving souls from death your love can cover a multitude of sins in short love your neighbor as yourself because you love the Lord your God with all of your heart with all of your soul and with all of your strength so as it happens the cure for a fractured heart is anything but law keeping

Martin Luther was wrong when he called this letter an epistle of straw as though it was somehow lesser according to James the only cure for a fractured heart is the gospel that is humbly receiving the grace of God and in light of this last chapter I should add that we don't go it alone we need one another and that concludes our introduction to the book of James let's pray heavenly father we thank you for the time we've been able to spend in this precious epistle lord I pray that you would heal our hearts as we humbly submit to you and to your word and frankly to one another within the church may we love one another support one another and may we together by your grace have our fractured hearts healed our double minded double mindedness turn to singularity in our devotion and allegiance to you we pray this in Christ's name amen