

November 5, 2017

## WELCOME TO THE WAITING ROOM

James 5:1-11

A man is in an accident in which both of his legs are seriously injured. He is taken to the hospital where the doctors order several tests. Finally a doctor comes in and says, "Well, I have good news and bad news." The man says, "Tell me the bad news first." The doctor sympathetically says, "I am very sorry to have to tell you this, but your legs are just too badly injured to save them. We are going to have to amputate both legs just below the knee." The man is devastated by this news, but he clings to hope. "You said there is good news. What's the good news?" The doctor brightened and said, "Oh, the guy in the next bed said he'd like to buy your shoes."

You might think as we look at the passage in James that we're going to study today that this is that kind of bad news, good news situation. There is some definitely bad news, but the good news maybe isn't all that great. But there is good news in this passage. It is likely not the news that we typically want to hear, but it is, in fact good news, and it is crucially important for us if we are to thrive in this world. Let's look at James 5:1-11.

### HARD TIMES LIE AHEAD FOR THE RICH

The opening verses of this last chapter of James are downright disturbing. They sound so condemning and so violent. Weep and wail for the misery that is coming upon you. The corrosion of your wealth will destroy your flesh like fire. Wow. This is some really judgmental stuff!

A disturbing aspect of this is that James addresses the "rich," the plutocrats, in this section and in terms of James' day, we are all rich. Most of James' readers could not have imagined the material abundance that we take for granted. Even in terms of the average standard of living for the world today we are all rich. The Pew Research Center divides the world population into several income categories. There is poor, lower middle, middle, upper middle and upper income. Only 7% of the world's population is found in that top, upper income category. However, 56% of Americans are in that category! In other words, we are all rich.

It sounds like James is really down on being rich. You could easily feel like God is against us because we are rich. He's telling us to weep and wail because misery is in our future. However, we need to read the whole paragraph because it changes things significantly. The first Christians were predominantly poor, and their

poverty was made worse by the persecution they had to endure for their faith. Persecution then and now usually has a significant economic component that meant their poverty was worsened by the fact that they were believers in Jesus.

Verse 4 says to the rich, “The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you.” I don’t love that translation. It sounds like not paying their workers was sort of an oversight. Oh, you forgot to pay them. The original text says they literally withheld wages from their employees. Well the IRS requires that. No, that’s about paying taxes, this was about robbing people. It was a purposeful act. Some of James’ readers were among those who were never paid for their work by the wealthy people who hired them. The people who had more than enough were ripping off the people who had nothing!

They didn’t stop at withholding wages. Verse 6 says, “You have condemned and murdered the innocent one.” In other words, they manipulated the justice system to get people, usually poor people, out of their way so they could fatten their bank accounts. This is not the only place where James mentioned this. In 2:6-7 he wrote, “Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are blaspheming the noble name of the one to whom you belong?”

It wasn’t just the fact that these people had a lot of money. It was the way they got their money and how they used the power that came with it. They used it to rip people off, to oppress poor Christians and batter them with all manner of injustices. It is because of this that James said a terrible, horrific justice awaited them.

This passage isn’t really intended to speak to the rich. In the Old Testament you will find long passages in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and many of the minor prophets that are addressed to nations other than Israel. The prophets thundered about judgment that was coming to these nations that opposed God’s people. Listen to what Isaiah said to Babylon in Isaiah 13:6-9. “Wail, for the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty. Because of this, all hands will go limp, every heart will melt with fear. Terror will seize them, pain and anguish will grip them; they will writhe like a woman in labor. They will look aghast at each other, their faces aflame. See, the day of the Lord is coming, a cruel day, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it.”

Why would God would have these prophets declaring judgment to nations that weren’t listening? They had no idea what those prophets were saying, and they didn’t care. Those prophets actually spoke to Israel. Their proclamations of

judgment on oppressing enemies was intended to remind Israel that God rules even over those enemy nations. Their messages were intended to be affirmation that God's justice would come on the nations that opposed and oppressed Israel, so the Israelis could be encouraged. James was doing much the same thing. His words to the oppressing rich were actually intended to encourage the poor and persecuted believers.

Notice in verse 7 that James says, "Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming." James audience was actually the poor and oppressed believers in Jesus, not the rich he spoke about. This howling denunciation of the rich who were making life miserable for the believers, was a reminder to the poor Christians that the ones who seemed to have it so good right now were in for a devastating future.

Not long ago while driving on the freeway I glimpsed a car in my rear view mirror weaving in and out of traffic in a risky fashion and coming fast. The guy flew past me, continuing to weave back and forth through the traffic. He had to be going 95 miles per hour, maybe more. It irked me. That clown was endangering other people. It's one thing if an idiot wants to do stupid things and put himself in jeopardy, but it's another when his irresponsibility endangers others. Would it make any difference for you if you were in my situation but you knew that a mile down the freeway there was a CHP officer patrolling? Oh yeah. How cool would it be to drive by see that speeder pulled over to the side of the road with the CHP right behind him? That's what James was telling his readers about the rich who were making life miserable for them.

### WE MUST PATIENTLY ENDURE HARD TIMES

Many years ago there was a couple that came to the church I served at the time that took issue with some aspects of my theology. It bothered them that I talked about the fact that we are all going to suffer. They felt that my perspective had been skewed by losses I have suffered. They felt that made me too negative. They believed that God rewards faith with abundant goodness, meaning wonderful circumstances. They were very successful in their business and were quite affluent. They were on their way to even more riches, certain that God wanted that for them. They were influenced by some who promulgate the idea that God wants us to be healthy and prosperous, and it is only lack of faith that keeps that from happening.

There are many people in the world who believe that idea with all their heart. It is hard to see how they maintain that position after reading James 5. James tells his readers to be patient in the face of the daunting and painful circumstances they lived under. He does not tell them if they only believe God will make them rich.

Instead he tells them in verse 10 to pay attention to “an example of patience in the face of suffering.”

To their credit my optimistic friends did not abandon the church I was serving, though they considered doing so quite seriously. A few years later their life blew up. Everything fell apart, and it kept falling apart. No matter how much they prayed things just kept going from bad to worse. One day the husband came to me and said, “Rick, you were right. I couldn’t see it at the time, but now I see that God is not about us having everything we want in this world. He is about us growing in grace and faith and the knowledge of him, and that sometimes the only way we can do that is by suffering.”

James uses the analogy of the farmer who waits patiently for the rain to come, hoping for a great harvest. Our problem is we want this life to be the harvest. James tells us we have the wrong picture in mind. Laurie and I were on vacation on Maui. One night we were having dinner at a restaurant we really like. Sitting near us was a family, one member of which was a little girl who was 4 or 5 years old. Laurie couldn't help overhear part of a conversation this little girl had with her mother. She said, "Mommie, can we move to Hawaii and live here forever. Daddy said we can." Yeah, we get that girl's sentiment. She was in what seemed like paradise to her and she wanted it to be permanent. We all do. We pray, "Hey, Lord, can you make my life paradise and let me live in it permanently?" But James informs us that's just now how it is, nor is it going to change as long as we are living in this age.

Our lives right now are not the harvest. It is yet in the future, and in this life we must patiently endure and persevere. Life will be hard at times. In 1 Peter 4:12 the apostle wrote, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you." If life is so hard it is disorienting, so full of hurt that you can't imagine how God could allow it, Peter says, "Don't be surprised." Don't think this is some aberration. This is what we should expect! We live in a fallen world that Paul said "groans" as it waits for the Lord to come back. Should we expect we will somehow be excused from that groaning?

Brene Brown is a research professor at the University of Houston, an author and a speaker in much demand. In 2012 she gave a speech at the TED conference titled "The Power of Vulnerability" that is one of the top 5 most viewed TED talks, with over 30 million views. Her high stress life led to what she calls a "breakdown," which resulted in her returning to her faith in Jesus. She says, "I definitely went

back to church for all the wrong reasons. I really went because this is hard and this hurts, and in all the midlife unraveling books they say, 'go back to church, that's what everybody does.' So I went back to church thinking it would be like an epidural, like it would take the pain away, I would just replace research with church...the church would make the pain go away. And then I discovered that faith and the church was not like an epidural at all; it was like a midwife who just stood next to me and said, 'Push! It's supposed to hurt.'"

## WE HAVE EXAMPLES THAT ENCOURAGE US

James says we should take as examples others who have gone through really difficult experiences and stayed faithful. The first example he points us to is that of the prophets. Jeremiah had to deal with several plots to kill him. At one point he was beaten and put in stocks. Another time he was put in an empty cistern and left to die in the mud at the bottom of it. His life was so hard because of his service to the Lord that he said in Jeremiah 20:7 "I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. In verse 8 he said, "The Word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long." Despite all the hardship Jeremiah remained faithful to the Lord. Like the farmer waiting for his crop, he waited patiently and endured.

James also points us to the most famous sufferer in the Bible, Job. We are familiar with his story. In Job 1:8 the Lord described Job this way, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil." He was the Lord's servant. He lived in awe of God and he was blameless. What did that get him? In the calculus of this world it got him inconceivable loss. He lost all of his material wealth, but infinitely worse than that, he lost all of his children. They were all killed! Well, but if we have our health we can survive anything. Yeah, about that. He then lost his health. This guy suffered pain that would absolutely destroy me. In 6:2-4 he said, "If only my anguish could be weighed and all my misery be placed in the scales! It would surely outweigh the sand in the seas. No wonder my words have been impetuous. The arrows of the Almighty are in me, my spirit drinks in their poison; God's terrors are marshaled against me."

Job says we should dredge up all the sand on the bottom of all the oceans in the world and all the beaches, and put all that sand on one side of a scale. Then put his pain and misery on the other side. Which would prove heavier? He said it was his pain. It was like God called up all the reserves of terror at his disposal and sent them to attack poor Job. But in Job 13:15 he said, "Though he slay me, yet I will hope in him." Even if God killed him, Job would keep trusting God. He would wait, he would believe, he would keep saying what he said in 1:21, "Naked I came

from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, may the name of the Lord be praised." He wanted God to be glorified because of him whether God gave or God took away. James tells us that is the example to follow.

### APPLICATION

ONE COMMAND: *Be patient and strengthen your heart*

Twice in these verses James exhorts us to be patient. The second time in our translation he says, "be patient and stand firm," but the original text literally said "strengthen your heart." In other words, be strong from the inside out and wait, endure, persevere.

This is the bad news part of good news, bad news. Some of us right now are dealing with seriously difficult issues. All of us will have times where it feels like God has abandoned us or even turned against us. Hebrews 10:35-36 said, "Do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised."

Have you ever noticed what we call people who go to the doctor for help? We don't call them clients. We don't call them customers. We don't call them guests like they do at Disneyland. We call them patients. Why do you suppose that is? It's because the average time in a doctor's waiting room is 24 minutes. When Laurie and I learned we had to get rabies shots back in August we eventually ended up at Mercy Hospital in Dubuque, Iowa. The staff in the emergency department were terrific. But right off the bat (excuse the word) they warned us. They were apologetic, but said, "We're really busy tonight, and unfortunately because your situation is not an emergency you are at that bottom of the priority list. It's going to be a while." We said we understood. We waited about an hour and a half, then we got in to the treatment room. Again they were very apologetic and said, "We're so sorry, but we are out of the vaccine. We're sending someone to get it from another hospital, but it's going to take a while." The whole thing ended up taking about 3 hours. The amazing thing is we beat the average. The average wait when you go to the emergency department at a hospital is 4 hours and 7 minutes. Patients indeed!

But that's not really why they are called patients? It is because they are going to see someone who knows more than they do and they are going to have to trust his or her knowledge, judgments and actions, and they are going to have to keep on trusting because the solution to whatever their problem is will almost certainly take some time. They have to wait for the healing and treatment to work. We are God's patients. We have to learn to trust him. Trust his knowledge, judgment and his

work and wait for his work to solve the problem. James does tell us some things that can help us be patient as we wait.

### JUSTICE WILL COME

Romans 2:6-8 says, "God will repay each person according to what they have done. To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger."

James' readers were doing what is right. They were believing in the Lord of all and trying to serve him, but others were rewarding them by taking advantage of them, mistreating them, abusing them and oppressing them, and they were getting away with it. Those poor first Christians were desperate for vindication. Their souls cried out in agony for it.

All of us long for justice. We are desperate for vindication. We want things to be set right. The message of James is that God is going to set things right. It bugs me that so often terrible people seem to have things go their way in this world and good people often get a raw deal. But James reminds we can be patient because God will make everything right. He will reward those who trust in him, and he will judge those who do wrong. No one gets away with anything. So we can be at peace and trust in him. We need not fret.

### THE LORD'S COMING IS NEAR

James reminds us that the Lord's coming is near. He could come to make at any moment. But James wrote that 2000 years ago. People have been saying Jesus could come back at any time for centuries. It sort of feels like it's never going to happen, doesn't it?

There are churches and people whose major focus in ministry is whipping up emotion by showing that we are in the last days, that surely Jesus is going to come back very soon. They point to upheaval in the Middle East, to the many earthquakes and natural disasters that have been happening so frequently, to the near constant war that is going on in the world, to the rapid increase in horrific violence that we have experienced, and say, "these are the signs that we are in the last times."

For instance, the Lamb and the Lion ministry points out that in the past few years in the United States according to the insurance industry we have experienced 9 of the 10 worst natural disasters in our history and the 5 costliest hurricanes in

history. See, all the signs are pointing to the end. Unfortunately for me, I've been hearing that kind of thing for my entire adult life.

Note carefully that in 2 Timothy 3:1 Paul wrote, "There will be terrible times in the last days." He then proceeded to describe how people would be in the last days, lovers of themselves, lovers of money, ungrateful, unholy, disobedient to parents, without self control, lovers of pleasure. Yeah, that certainly sounds like now. But Paul was explaining to Timothy why ministry back then was so hard, because he was describing the way people were then. The point is, they were in the last days then! The last days began when Jesus left this world and sent his Spirit to live in his followers. The last days will continue until he returns. The last days refer to the period between his first and second coming.

Some of the statistics the "last timers" use are a bit deceiving. Yes, we've experienced some of the most costly natural disasters ever recently. Um, have you ever heard of inflation? A storm of equal devastation today is going to be way more costly than one 25 years ago because everything costs more than it did back then. We have the wrong image of what it means for the Lord's coming to be near. We think of it being like a hurricane. You can see the signs when a hurricane is coming. These days they can track it and predict its path. They can tell people the time when it will hit in its area. People want to think the Lord's coming is like that. We see the signs and get a pretty good estimate of when he's going to come.

But the Lord's coming is not like that. Yes, it is near, but it is near in the way an earthquake is near. Everyone knows that all conditions are in place for the Big One to hit California. It could happen at any time. So we should be ready. As I thought about this sermon I reflected on this and realized I'm not. Part of the reason for that is I've been hearing about the Big One coming my entire life. After a while I sort of believe it academically, but not in my heart. It doesn't impact my behavior. But the truth is, the Big One is near. It could happen at any moment, and at some point, sooner or later, it will.

So it is with the coming of Jesus. It is near, meaning it could happen at any moment, and it will, sooner or later. So we should be ready. It is going to happen, and when it does all that is wrong will be made right. When it does we will find that all the waiting, all the enduring, has been more than worth it.

So how does that help me wait and persevere? Put yourself in that doctor's waiting room. You've been there a long time and you're feeling done with waiting. Suppose somehow you learn the doctor isn't even there and he won't be back today. They're keeping you there for no reason. Are you going to keep waiting? No way. The



thing that keeps you waiting is you need to see the doctor and you know it is going to happen, so you just have to hang in there. Knowing the Lord's coming is near helps us wait because we know it will happen. It also helps me to do what God wants me to do today, even if it's hard, because I want to be ready.

## OTHERS ENCOURAGE US

Another thing we can do to help us is remember how other followers of Jesus have suffered patiently and stood firm, faithful to God. We should remember how they have brought glory to God by their steadfastness. What if Job, after suffering so terribly and getting no answers, had said, "that's it for me. God, if he's there at all, is just mean and not to be trusted, so I'm out"? Would you even know who he is? No, Job has had such enormous impact for 3 millennia because he stood firm and trusted God.

Last month the *New York Times* carried an article written by a young Christian leader in Hong Kong named Derek Lam. In it he wrote, "Since I was 16 years old I have wanted to be a pastor...Biblical principles have also informed my democratic activism for the past 6 years. It is for that reason that I am likely to be jailed next month and that I will be barred from ever becoming a pastor." He says the authorities are trying to get the church to bow to current leader of China, Xi Jinping. He says, "I won't make Jesus bow down to Xi Jinping... Although there is nothing I would love more than to become a pastor and preach the gospel in Hong Kong, I will never do so if it means making Jesus subservient to Xi Jinping." He said he will continue being faithful even if he has to do so from behind bars.

In his book, *The Tech-Wise Family*, Andy Crouch wrote about the terrible earthquake that devastated Haiti in 2010. Over 100,000 people were killed, countless buildings were destroyed and the infrastructure was effectively obliterated. National Public Radio said this about it, "For the Western hemisphere's poorest country, the earthquake that hit was an especially cruel blow. Despite this, it's hard to find a Haitian who doesn't profess a belief in a loving God." Crouch says the people of Haiti responded to the tragedy by singing praise to God. He wrote, "All over the hills of Haiti those first terrible nights, under the starlit sky, the voices of the people of Haiti rose up in grief and lament, in prayer and hope. They had something we have almost lost, and they still have it, as anyone who has visited a Haitian church or family knows." Their testimony says to us, if they can withstand such tragedy, if Derek Lam can face such opposition and persecution and continue to love, trust and serve God, surely we can too.

## GOD IS COMPASSIONATE

That's all good, I suppose, but isn't there anything more immediate that can help me deal with the hardships of life right now? Yes, there is. James ends this section with a crucial reminder. Remember what God brought about in Job's life. Remember how it ended. God graciously blessed Job and gave him a new family and wealth. God is full of compassion and mercy. James says not only is God compassionate, he is full of compassion. There could not be another ounce of compassion in him. God is not aloof and uncaring. When Moses asked God to reveal his glory to him, God gave him a glimpse and said in Exodus 34:6, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness." God is compassionate and gracious. To have compassion means literally to feel with. God feels the stress, the ache, the weariness that you feel with you. In other words, he deeply cares.

Recently Laurie and I were taking care of Ella and Cara, our little granddaughters, for a day. Toward the end of the day Cara was sleeping and we were giving Ella dinner. She was sitting in her high chair and I was sitting next to her. We were having a wonderful time as I was placing her food on the tray in front of her and we were playing together. Then she indicated she wanted me to get closer and when I did she reached up and put her head next to mine and hugged me. She did that a couple of more times. I cannot begin to tell you how deeply that touched me. It is ridiculous how much that meant to me. I delight in that little girl and her sister. I would do anything for them. There will be times when I will keep them from something they think they want because I know it is not good for them. But I am always loving them and seeking their good. And this is how God feels about his children. He delights in us, and he cares about us more than we can even imagine. There may be times when we feel like he is keeping some good from us, but he is always seeking our good.

God cares. He has compassion. That means that you are never alone. Even when it feels like you've been abandoned, when you cannot possibly understand why God would allow this in your life, he cares. And he is acting. He is acting in a way that will bring about a blessed result. You may not see it any time soon, but be patient and wait, trusting, for God is full of compassion.

We are going to have those times that are difficult. All of us at times will suffer hardship. What do we need to help us patiently endure? Here are some things that we will need:

To need to know it's not forever. Imagine if Toby were going through med school knowing it would never end. Who would endure that? No one. So we need to know

whatever we are going through, it is not forever. This passage has reminded us that it is not. At the very least we know a time is coming when all of this will end, when it will all be fixed.

To know there is a point to all of this. I was exercising this week, and not enjoying it, when the thought popped into my head, "what if this is useless? What if the supposed 'experts' are wrong and in fact exercise doesn't do us any good at all? What if I'd be exactly the same as I am right now if I had never exercised?" If that were somehow found to be true I wouldn't exercise anymore. I endure it because there is a point to it, and the point is something I very much desire. Without that point I won't do it. So it is with us enduring the hardships we have to go through and staying faithful, trusting in God, grateful and joyful. There has to be a point. That last statement James made about the character of God is crucial. He is compassionate. He cares deeply about us. That being true, do you think he is going to allow lots of painful ordeals into our lives with no point to any of it? Do you think I would willingly allow hard or painful things in the lives of Ella and Cara that have no point? No way. I would do all I could to keep them from pain because I have so much compassion for them. That would not be compassionate or loving. That assures us that there is a point to all of this. It means something. Sometimes we will see the point. Sometimes we won't. Job probably never saw the point in his day, but there was a point. And it is something he wanted.

To know that it is possible to endure it. Laurie wanted to have new hinges put on our cabinets in our kitchen. This was needed because the existing hinges were pretty much falling apart. Back in the summer a guy who did some work on our kitchen told Laurie he would replace all those hinges for a great price. He did really good work, so she wanted him to do it. But she called him several times and he never returned her calls. He had gotten another job that kept him busy, so it was obvious that he didn't have the time for our dinky little job. So for months our kitchen cabinets would mock Laurie. She couldn't quite finish our kitchen project because she needed those hinges replaced. I decided it wasn't possible to get Tony, the guy she wanted. So I kept telling her we needed to find someone else. To me, calling him was a waste of time. But periodically she would call, because she thought it was still possible. We were talking about it last Saturday and I told her again we just needed to find someone else. She got her phone. I thought she was going to call someone who would give us a recommendation. She didn't. She called Tony yet again. And he answered! He agreed to do the job. Not only that but he agreed to do it that day. He came over within an hour and before the day was over the job was completed.

Laurie persevered because she thought it was possible. I gave up because I thought it was impossible. If we think it is impossible to endure and be patient as James exhorts us, we will give up. But there are two reminders in this passage that help us remember it is possible. First of all, others have done it. We have the examples of other believers who have endured far more than we are, so we know it is possible. Second, God is compassionate. He cares about us. He is with us. He won't abandon us any more than I would abandon my precious grandchildren. He will be with us and will give us the strength to endure. In fact, he guarantees us that he will allow nothing beyond what we are able to bear. 1 Corinthians 10:13 promises this. God will make us able to endure and persevere if we will look to him, trust him and live for his glory. So be patient, and strengthen your heart.