

James 5:7-11

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[0 : 0 0] How do you cope with suffering? How do you handle pain? How do you respond to hardship or disappointment? I think these are real questions for all of us. I don't think they're real questions. I know that they are real questions for all of us. And it has ever been so. James, in his letter that we've read from already this evening, is writing to Christians who are suffering in one way or another. And he wants to help them. That is his intention as he writes to them. And what he writes to them has that as its goal, to help them. James is not able to remove their suffering. But he is able to instruct them, to challenge them, and to encourage them in the midst of their suffering. He's able to bring them a word from God. And what we have here in this letter, in the verses that we've read and that we're going to be spending a little time considering this evening, is just that. A word from God to us. And the God who is speaking, it is good for us to be reminded and to have very much at the forefront of our minds. The God who is speaking to us on this matter, on this subject of suffering, is the God who, in the person of Jesus, knows all about suffering in its most brutal expressions.

He knows the darkest hours in his own experience in his Son. Well, let's explore what James has to say in these verses. And we'll do so with the help of three headings that will guide us in what we have to say. First of all, we want to just notice, and we won't dwell very long on this, but notice what we could describe as the harsh reality. But then move on to the challenging call that is extended to us in the midst of that reality. And then also consider what we're calling the word delivered that will help us to respond as we ought to the call that we're going to hear. So as we go through each of these, I think hopefully it will all kind of come together and make sense. So first of all, let's just spend a little time noticing what is the harsh reality that James almost takes as a given, but also makes explicit reference to. And the harsh reality is that life is tough, that we suffer. We experience in different ways what it is to suffer.

Now in God's providence that we sometimes find very difficult to grasp and to understand and get our heads around, it's evidently the case, we know it's the case, that some, and even if we speak about Christians specifically, some suffer much, much more than others. That is true, and it's difficult for us to know why that is so. That's the observed reality. But for all of us, in some measure, suffering is what we might call the bread and butter of life. Now suffering is multifaceted, and we might want to just ask the question, what kind of suffering does James have in mind suffering in these words that he addresses to the Christians that he's writing to? I think he has in mind all suffering, suffering of every kind, but I think in this passage we can distinguish or note how James distinguishes between two, what we might call distinct categories of suffering. In the first place, there is suffering that all, believers and unbelievers alike, are subject to. So in verse 7, when the call is, be patient then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. We notice that in introducing this section, he makes a reference to what he has just said. So he says, be patient then, brothers.

And so he's obviously referring to what he's just been talking about in the previous verses. And what has been talking about in the previous verses? Well, he's been talking about, we were thinking about it last Sunday morning, he's talking about the wicked wealthy and the suffering that is endured by the weak and the poor and the downtrodden as victims of these oppressors. The previous verses speak of unpaid wages, they speak of injustice, they speak of violence that many were victims of.

Now, though, in verse 7, clearly he is speaking to believers, be patient then, brothers, these examples of suffering that he has just spoken of clearly are examples of suffering that are no respecter of creed or confession. It wasn't just Christians who were not being paid their wages. It wasn't just Christians who were the victims of injustice or violence. The poor of all confessions and none would have similarly suffered. And so this backward reference to the first few verses of the chapter make it clear that when he speaks about suffering, at one level he's speaking about all kinds of suffering that all are victims to, at least potentially. It's not particularly suffering that Christians endure. And we can think of other examples or causes of suffering that are no respecter of persons, suffering that is common to man, ill health, bereavement, loss of employment, the breakdown of relationships. These are things that happen to everybody, not just to Christians. And we could go on. But it's also clear that James in these verses has in mind suffering that is endured to use his own language in the name of the Lord. So there in verse 10, where in actual fact, it's the first time that he actually makes explicit reference to suffering, or at least uses the word suffering. He says, brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Now, though he doesn't make the connection explicit, it's very clear that what

[6 : 29] James is saying is that much of their suffering that they endured with patience and with perseverance was because of their loyalty to God, because they brought a word from God that was rejected, that was unpopular, and so they suffered as a result because of their faithfulness to God. And so that's, if you wish, a distinct category of suffering that James is also considering or has in mind as he writes these verses or as he writes this part of the letter. So that's the harsh reality that we all suffer in many different ways. But then James moves on to, or we're moving on in terms of the way we're considering it. He begins with this. James addresses to those who he is writing to what we're calling a challenging call. At the very beginning of certainly our section, verse 7 begins with these two words, be patient, be patient. He's saying this is what you have to do when you face suffering, when you're enduring suffering, when you're experiencing pain. What you need to do is you need to be patient.

Now, I don't know how you respond to that call. You might say, well, yeah, fair enough. That's that's what we should do. But maybe, many of you are thinking, well, yeah, but that's not easy.

You know, that's difficult. It's easy for James to say it. It's easy to write it down on a bit of paper. It's easy maybe to write a weak card to somebody and say, be patient. But actually doing it is another matter altogether. But let's just think a little bit about this patience and what it looks like. What is it, in fact, that James is calling the believers to do? What does he understand by patience? I think we can draw out one or two aspects of this from the passage. I think, first of all, to be patient, or what patience involves in the first place is a patient and loving attitude to others.

In the passage, James talks about the relationships of one with another. Don't rumble with one another. And so clearly he's calling on the believers that in their relationships with others, in the first instance with other fellow believers, but the principle holds beyond that circle, that they are to demonstrate in the face of frustrations, in the face of difficulties, in the face of misunderstandings, of the pain that accompanies all of these things, that they are to endeavor to demonstrate a patient and loving attitude to others. We're called to exercise forbearance towards those who treat us badly sometimes and cause us pain and hardship. We are to love our enemies and to refrain or restrain from lashing out, be that verbally or physically. We are to be patient with others. But I think another aspect of this patience, and these things are related and intertwined, that the patience that he's calling us to is what we might call also a resolute steadfastness in adverse and painful circumstances. So it's not just about how we react or relate to other people, but it's also how we respond to circumstances that are causing us grief of one kind or another.

So often that is what generates difficulty and pain for us, adverse circumstances. Life itself seems to deal us some pretty brutal hands, if you don't mind me using that kind of language.

[10 : 22] And in such circumstances, when everything seems to be contriving against us, faith itself can be shaken and we can waver in our profession. And the call that is being extended to us, the challenging call is to be patient, to be steadfast, to stand firm in the midst of these difficult circumstances.

Maybe one way of kind of illustrating what we're being called to do is, I don't know if you've ever watched on TV sumo wrestling or seen maybe just a clip of sumo wrestling. So you've got these two generally quite large gentlemen. And I don't know much about sumo wrestling, but it seems to me that the idea is to get one of them out of the circle that's drawn in the ground there. And obviously, you know, what you're trying to do is to ensure that doesn't happen, that you remain within the circle. Well, I think life can sometimes be like, you know, you're the little guy and you've got this huge sumo wrestler trying to throw you out of this circle. Now, you really have very little prospect of maybe getting him out of the circle, but the one thing you do need to try and do is somehow stand firm. Just stand firm. You won't maybe overcome him. You won't have some heroic victory over him, but at least stand firm, stubbornly, resolutely. Just hold your ground so that you're not cast out of the ring and suffer ignominious defeat. You need to stand firm. I think there's a sense here that this is the kind of idea when James here says, you too be patient and stand firm. Stand firm.

This is not easy, but stand firm. Stand firm in the fight. Stand firm in the faith. I think there are times when what we are called to is to simply stand firm in the faith. We may not appear to be making, we maybe aren't making great advances in the faith, but we can stand firm in the faith. So, this patience relates to how we, the attitude we have to other people, how we deal with other people, with patience, with kindness, but also the attitude that we have to the circumstances we face. I think another element, and again, this is all kind of intertwined. You might, we can also detect a third element, a determined, or what I'm calling a determined self-control, so self-control being the key here, in the face of, or in the midst of suffering. And I draw that out from the way James throws into his, you know, his letter, or this section of the letter, this call not to grumble. And there in verse 9, you know, don't grumble against each other, brothers. And I have to acknowledge that I was, as I was reading through these verses in preparation for pulling together the sermon, I thought, how does this fit in? To my mind, at any rate, it just seemed a little bit incongruous, this call in the midst of everything else that James was saying, don't grumble against each other. He said, well, why is he talking about grumbling against each other? What's that got to do with his big theme of suffering, and patience, and endurance? Why does he speak about grumbling against each other?

But the more I thought about it, and in a sense, it's not that difficult to work out the connection. To grumble is not to be patient. That's what we do when we're not patient.

When we're not patient, we grumble against other people, or about the circumstances that we face. Grumbling is what we do when we fail to exercise forbearance. And when we grumble, we make everything worse for everybody. It's not just ourselves who are affected by that attitude or that manner of responding, but others too are affected by our words and by our grumbling against them, or even just about stuff that is going on. And how easy it is for us to grumble against one another, to be frustrated by one another? We know our own weaknesses and how we can be the cause of others being hurt or frustrated, and it goes in both directions. I imagine you've heard this little ditty. It's not from the Bible. It's just a little ditty that I've heard over the years, and you may have maybe have heard it as well. But let me just, for those who have heard it, remind you of it, or if you haven't heard it, see what you make of it. I don't know who the author of this is. To live above with the saints we love, that is the purest glory. To live below with the saints we know, ah, that's another story. And does that not capture sometimes a reality? You know, we don't always get on. We sometimes annoy each other. We sometimes irritate one another. What we do and what we leave undone causes friction between us, you know, as believers, as Christians. And what is our natural response to that? It's to grumble, it's to moan, it's to complain about our lot.

[15 : 45] And so, in very much under this umbrella of this call to be patient, you have the prohibition, if you wish, of the negative side of that. Don't grumble against each other. Suffering lends itself to grumbling, to grumbling. But the call is to be patient and not do so. Now, none of this is easy.

It's not easy to be patient and loving towards those who treat us badly. It's not easy to stand firm in the midst of the storm. It's not easy to not grumble. We need grace. But listen to this and be encouraged. The expression translated, stand firm, there in verse 8. Notice in verse 8, you too, be patient and stand firm. So, that little expression, stand firm, translates Greek words that literally would be translated, strengthen your heart. So, one way of translating, if you were to adopt a very literal translation of these words in verse 8, would be, you too, be patient and strengthen your heart. Now, why do I mention that? Well, I mention that because the very same expression is found in Hebrews chapter 13. So, just a couple of pages back from where we are in James. In Hebrews 13 verse 9, the very same Greek expression is found. But in Hebrews 13 9, at least in our translation of the Bible, the translation used is that more literal one. It was deemed the suitable translation in the context. But listen what it says. So, Hebrews 13 verse 9, the second sentence in the verse, it says, it is good for our hearts to be strengthened. Or it is good to stand firm, if we were to translate it as it's been done in James. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened. But then notice what the writer to the Hebrews says, it is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, by grace.

And there's this dose of gospel realism in that. And there's a recognition that this call to be patient, to not grumble, to love our enemies, to not lash out, is only possible as our hearts are strengthened by grace.

And so, we can ask God for that help. Lord, strengthen our hearts by grace. But how does God strengthen our hearts by grace? And that question takes us to our third heading, and the third and final thing we want to talk about. And that is what I call the word delivered.

I said that there was a word from God to help us. Now, obviously, the call to be patient is itself a word from God. But here, what I'm thinking about is the counsel that is given by God through James to help us obey this challenging call to be patient, to stand firm. And we acknowledge it's difficult.

[18 : 39] We find it difficult to do that. Often, we don't do that. Well, what does James say to help us respond to and obey this call to be patient? And I think what James does is that he cancels us to look in three directions. And maybe thinking of it in these terms, I hope, can make it more memorable or easy to remember. And so, you can take this with you into the world. He counsels us to look in three directions. And as we look in each of these directions, we will see God, or we will discover or be reminded of what God is like. In the face of suffering, we need to fix our eyes on our gracious God. We need to know God more and more. We need a good dose of theology, the knowledge of God. We need to know what He's like. And the more we know Him, the more we will be able to respond as we ought to this call to be patient. So, let me explain. James calls us, first of all, to look ahead. That's one direction that he calls us to look in. He also calls us to look around, and he calls us to look back.

Let's think of each of these very briefly. First of all, he calls us to look ahead, specifically to look ahead to the Lord's coming. There at the very beginning of our section, verse 7, be patient then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. He's saying you're suffering, you need to be patient.

Well, look in this direction. This is one of the directions you need to look in. Look ahead to the Lord's coming. Maybe we could capture why this would be helpful with an illustration. I wonder if you've ever been, I imagine many of you have, been on a forest trail or hike, and at the beginning of the trail, or maybe in the course of the trail, somewhere along the way, you've seen a map to guide you, just some kind of wooden panel where there's an outline of the trail, the route that it takes.

And in that map, at one point, it says, you are here. And you're looking for that because you're not really sure where you are, but the map helps you because it identifies where you are at that moment. It says, you are here. Okay, that's where I am. And then, of course, you notice where you're trying to get to. And of course, that could be a long way away, many obstacles before you get there.

So you're here, and then you have in mind where you're actually going, what your destination is. And as you continue on your hike, on your trail, you need to be realistic and acknowledge where you are, but you also need to keep in view your destination. And this is a little bit like what James is doing. He's saying to the believers, you're here. And yes, here is a place of suffering.

[21 : 33] Here, where you are right now, is a place where you experience pain and disappointment and frustration. But look ahead. Look ahead to your destination. Look ahead to what awaits you. Look ahead to this glorious reality that the Lord's coming is near, that He will return. The Lord is near. The Lord's return is near or imminent. But that kind of begs another question. How does that looking ahead help us in the midst of suffering in the here and now? Well, I think in a number of ways. First of all, it gives us a sense of perspective. We're reminded that this is not all that there is. There can be nothing more difficult in the face of suffering if we imagine that there is no end point, that it's unrelenting in character, that we imagine that it will ever be so. That must be the most difficult thing to handle. But when we're given the sense of perspective that our suffering now, however intense it may well be, is passing. That there is something ahead that we can look forward to that is real and that really will happen. The time will come. The Lord is near. What you're enduring today is not permanent. The future is better, way better. So it gives us a sense of perspective. But I think also, and especially for the believers in the context in which James is writing, maybe not a context that we can kind of identify quite so much ourselves, is I think what James is doing here is giving to the believers an assurance that justice will triumph. Remember that just in the previous verses, he's been talking to believers who are suffering great injustice. They're not getting their wages paid.

They're the victims of oppression and injustice at the hands of wealthy, powerful men. And there seems to be no prospect of redress. You know, earthly justice has let them down and will continue to let them down.

And here James says, be assured that justice will triumph. The Lord's coming is around the corner.

The judge is coming, as he goes on to make reference to just in the following verses. Justice will triumph. We may be victims today, but tomorrow we will be vindicated. So it gives us a sense of perspective to look ahead to the Lord's coming. It gives us an assurance that justice will triumph. But I think it also gives us a salutary reminder that we are accountable to our Lord as judge. You see there in verse 9, when he urges the believers to not grumble, he does so in really quite a sobering way because he says, don't grumble against each other, brothers. And you might say, well, that's good sound advice.

It's not good to grumble. And he could have just left it there. But no, he says, don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The judge is standing at the door. And so what James is doing very solemnly and soberly is reminding us that it's not just the bad guys who will be judged.

[24 : 41] I'm sure some of the believers there, when he heard of James saying, yeah, these rich oppressors, they're going to have their comeuppance. They'd have been saying, amen. Yes, we look forward to that day. These evil men, it'll be wonderful when they're, you know, they're punished. And then James says, well, yeah, okay, but just a moment. We're all going to be judged. And so our conduct should be such that acknowledges that reality. And so there is here the salutary reminder that we are all accountable to our Lord as judge. What does this forward glance, this looking ahead, tell us about God that helps us in the midst of suffering? Well, it's a reminder that God is sovereign over time in history. It reminds us that God is just. It reminds us that God is near, even in the midst of all that we are enduring. So look ahead. But secondly, the second direction that we have to look in to help us be patient and to endure is to look around. Look around at the Lord's provision. Notice in verse 7, the example that he gives. Be patient then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See. So look. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains.

And he continues. Now, the example that James gives of the farmer waiting for his harvest is not just a homely illustration of the need for patience that would resonate with readers living in a largely agrarian or farming society. It is that. But it is more than that. You see, James, in the language that he is employing is deliberately echoing the language of the Old Testament prophets as we find him doing repeatedly in this letter. And very particularly in his reference there in that verse to the autumn and spring rains. Notice there he says that the farmer, how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. Now, in the Old Testament, with significant regularity, we find a reference to the autumn and spring rains are sometimes described as the early and late rains. They're spoken of and described as making their appearance as an evidence of and a picture of God's faithfulness. So this is a picture that the prophets often employed to say to God's people, to remind people that God is faithful. He says, you know, they would say, look at the early and late rains, the autumn and spring rains. They always come. They always come. They never fail. Those rains that are so necessary for your crops to flourish and for harvest to be forthcoming. These rains, they're like clockwork. No doubt from one year to the other, they wouldn't always have come at exactly the same time and in the same volume. But in the grand scheme of things, you know, these autumn and spring rains were often used, as I say, by the prophets as an evidence of God's faithfulness. Now, for reasons of time, I'm not going to point you in the direction of different occasions when that is so. Well, let me just read one to give a flavor of it. In the prophet Joel, in chapter 2 and verse 23, listen to what the prophet says as he addresses God's people.

He says, be glad, O people of Zion, rejoice in the Lord your God, for he has given you the autumn rains in righteousness. He sends you abundant showers, both autumn and spring rains as before. You see how the prophet presents this reality that they observe around them of the autumn and spring rains as evidence of God's covenant faithfulness. He's always provided before and he continues to do this. He has done it again. And what's the big message? The big message is that God is faithful. So this call to look around at the Lord's provision, even and especially in the midst of suffering, what does it tell us about God? Well, it tells us that God is faithful, that God provides all that is needful in his perfect time. Hence, be patient, be patient, because God is faithful. He will deliver, he will provide. Be patient. So look ahead to the Lord's coming, look around to the Lord's provision, and then finally look back, look back to the experience of the Lord's prophets and the Lord's people. We find that in verses 10 and 11. What is to be gained by reflecting on the example of the prophets and then particularly of one of God's people on Job? Well, let's look at each in turn.

First of all, the prophets. The suffering of the prophets is a reminder that it was ever so, that suffering has ever been the lot of God's people. And so James is saying, look back, you know, the prophets, these men that you hold in such high regard, they suffered. You know, they suffered.

And it's nothing new, nothing unusual. It's the way it is. Just be mindful of that. But not only be mindful of the fact that this is the reality, but notice also the endurance of the prophets. This would serve or serves as an encouragement that perseverance in the face of suffering is possible.

[30 : 09] They endured. They endured. They endured great suffering, but they persevered. Well, you can do likewise. Be like them. And then, of course, we see how the perseverance of the prophets is met by God's approval and blessing. Verse 11, as you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. Blessed by God.

God. Enjoying God's approval. So there's that prize, if you wish, of experiencing and knowing God's approval as we endure and persevere in the midst of suffering. What does looking back to the prophets teach us about God? Well, it teaches us that God is with us to enable us and to bless us as we endure in the midst of suffering. But then finally, Job. Let's just pause for a moment and think about Job as an example of perseverance and suffering. And when you think about Job, perhaps what you know about Job from the times you've read the book or heard him spoken about, I wonder if you, like me, wonder or your first reaction might be, well, Job doesn't seem the most likely poster boy for patient submission to God's perfect will. And because we know that Job, in the midst of his many trials, and there were many and they were severe, we know that Job often protested. Now, that alone, I think, is encouraging.

Because here, James is saying, as an example, somebody who did complain, somebody who didn't always understand, somebody who was confused in the midst of suffering. And so, what James isn't saying is that you need to have this passive, entirely submissive understanding of every twist and turn, and to be entirely calm in the midst of it all. He's saying, no, Job, Job's a good example for you. And Job was confused.

And Job didn't understand. And Job protested. And that's okay. You know, that is what we do and can do. That in itself is an evidence of not responding as we ought to suffering. But it's also, of course, necessary to stress that though Job often expressed his complaint, he never surrendered. He stood firm in the faith. When he could often have thrown in the towel, he didn't. He stood firm to the end. And so, there is that challenge also from the example of Job. And Job, as we see in the passage, he was rewarded.

We read there, you have heard of Job's perseverance and seen what the Lord finally brought about, how he was vindicated and rewarded. Now, in the case of Job, this reward was the restoration of his material prosperity. Now, our reward will always be a restoration of what has been lost, if indeed loss is the cause of our suffering. But our reward or the outcome of our suffering will always be grounded in and provide evidence of the compassion and mercy of God. The conclusion that James comes to as he thinks about Job, the Lord is full of compassion and mercy. So, what do we learn about God as we look back to Job? Well, we are reminded that God, our God is a God who is full of compassion and mercy.

[33 : 44] So, in the face and in the midst of suffering, remember and discover that God is full of mercy. He's full of compassion. There is and ever will be an ample supply of compassion and mercy in the heart and actions of God in your favor. His grace is sufficient. His mercy is sufficient.

His compassion is sufficient. And so, in the midst of your suffering, in the midst of your harsh reality, whatever it might be, when God comes to you and he says, be patient, he says, stand firm, and you say, well, that's really difficult. Well, first of all, remember that that strengthening is that strengthening that he can grant to you by grace. But the manner in which he does so is by encouraging you to do what James encouraged his readers to do and encourages us to do. In the midst of suffering, look ahead and remember that the Lord is near, the Lord's coming is approaching. That would grant a measure of perspective to your suffering and the other things we mentioned. Look around and be reminded of God's faithfulness in his dealings with his people. And look back to the prophets, to Job, and no doubt to others, and be challenged and encouraged by how God helped them and enabled them to endure in the face of suffering. Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for this passage that we have read. We pray that the truth that we've been giving thought to would be of a very real and practical use to us in the midst of whatever trial or challenge that we might be facing, perhaps even in this week that is beginning. We do pray that your spirit would help us to remember these things and to draw them to our attention at the very moment and in the circumstances where it is most needful. And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.