

J *The Book of* James

Session Twelve:
December 14, 2004

James 5:7-11—Waiting for the Rain

❖ The Text (NRSV)

7Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. 8You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. 9Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See the judge is standing at the doors! 10As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. 11Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

❖ What's going on here?

-v.7-8—In some sense, 5:7-11 does double duty—it both develops the theme of 5:1-6 from a new point of view, and it begins a movement toward the close of the whole book. As for the first, we see the farmer imagery picked up and developed from the first section of chapter five. Both v.4-6 and 7-8 use the language world of farming, and both point forward with expectancy to a day when God will act (“a day of slaughter” in 5:5, and “the coming of the Lord” in 5:7). But whereas James seemed to be aiming his comments on those who used their wealthy to unjustly cheat their neighbors, foreseeing the coming action of God as a vengeful righting of wrongs, now James seems to address those who are feeling oppressed—and to them, the coming action of God will be their vindication. The point of this continuing metaphor of farming seems to be that the coming action of God will be both reversal and rescue at the same time. Wrongs will be set right, and for the ones who have oppressed others, this will feel like judgment, while for those who have been trampled on, this action of God is something to hope for and find comfort in.

This backdrop of the coming day of the Lord is also a feature that identifies this section as the closing of a letter. We had said at the beginning that James lacks many of the traditional signposts of a 1st-century epistle (letter), aside from the rather broad address in the beginning of the book. And while it is by no means certain that this book really was first meant to be a letter delivered to someone else to read, there is some sense of closure in these last 14 verses that suggest the book has been shaped to end like a traditional letter. As mentioned, the idea of “eschatological injunction” (or in non-jargon, “direction for how to live in light of the final coming of Jesus and the Day of the Lord”) is a regular feature of the end of many of our New Testament letters (think of Rom. 13:11-14, and living “as in the day”, for example). The idea throughout the New Testament seems to be that we are defined in part by our hope of God’s future action—Jesus is returning, so live in preparation, as it were. Also suggestive of the end of a letter is the summary and recapitulation of themes that happens to some degree in 5:7-20.

Now, in any case, whether we’re supposed to hear these themes and think “The end of the letter is coming!” or just to hear another new thought, James is clear that he sees the coming of the Lord as a reality that is both good and nearing. It is a reason to be patient. This advice to be patient is directed at people who are going through sufferings of some kind—again, it’s hard to piece together all of what is going on, but James’ continual refrain in the face of those sufferings is to point to the character of God and the promise of God’s action. We can face the present sufferings, James says, because we know that at the Lord’s coming, vindication for the oppressed will come and injustices will be set right.

The image of the farmer waiting for the harvest gets at what James envisions for his readers—there is an implicit trust on the part of the farmer that the rains

will come, and there is an appropriate humility that the crops will only come when the ground is watered—in time. And yet, any good farmer knows that there is work to be done to prepare the field in the mean time. This is the tension James has uplifted again and again—while the ultimate restoration and vindication for creation lays in God’s hands, we work and live in light of that coming restoration now. We wait for God’s coming, but it is not an idle or passive waiting. We are called to be a people actively anticipating what God will do at the last—we are to be, as James has already said, a firstfruits people who witness to the coming harvest even now, simply in who we are.

-v.9—So what does it look like to actively and hopefully wait for the coming of the Lord? James describes it yet again as peaceful life in community. James has repeatedly criticized his readers for the ways they become divided and self-interested (see especially 3:14-16, 4:1-2, and 4:11-13; all right, so it’s clear what James is *against*—but what is he *for*?) Here, James emphasizes the kind of love their community is called to have for one another by addressing his readers yet again as “brothers and sisters” (although the NRSV has “beloved”). James’ words about grumbling against one another not only echoes Jesus’ teaching (for example, see Matt. 5:21-22 and 7:1-5) but also James’ own teaching about not judging one another (4:11-13). Note that in both 4:11-13 and here in 5:9, the idea of judging one another is connected with God’s role as true judge over all. In 4:11-13, James suggested that when we stand in condemnation over our neighbors, we pretend to be above them and we usurp the place of God, who is the “one lawgiver and judge.” The same is true in 5:9; here, though, James talks about the immanence of God as judge, almost as if to say, “You don’t need to pretend to be judge—God, who is the real judge, is perfectly able to fill that role. God isn’t slacking off or unable to do his job, thank you very much.” Or as one Christmas carol puts it, even in the face of

present injustices and suffering, “God is not dead, nor doth he sleep.” For James, that is a source of hope and comfort for us, and it is also a release—we can let go of control over judging others, and instead, we are freed to love each other as brothers and sisters.

-v.10-11—James continues to try to give positive descriptions of what he has in mind by patient waiting, so he offers three examples of faithful persons. First of all, the whole company of prophets is given—as Jesus’ own references to the prophets suggests, they were remembered as people who spoke God’s word faithfully even as they were persecuted and their messages were rejected. But beyond just enduring hardship, the prophets are noteworthy for the *way* they endured—they did not merely hunker down, retreat into their shells, and weather persecution in silence. Rather, the prophets spoke boldly against the injustices and infidelities of their own societies. Their patient waiting took the form of angry protest quite often, and one almost wonders if James has that in mind, too. James doesn’t advocate retreating from the world in order to be patient—rather, patient waiting may well involve naming the idols and sins of ourselves and our societies and calling for change.

But at the same time, (and this is what makes the prophets such a *great* example for James), the prophets refrained from violently bringing about God’s judgment on their own terms. Their suffering and rejection was part of their witness and protest, and they did not respond with violence or force to stop a wayward Israel or sinful rulers. This is again part of James’ way of being the people of God—while we live in and with the world, we are called not to play by the world’s rules, which so often are centered on how *I* can get what *I* want at *any* cost and are opposed to the ways of the Lord that are centered on love for neighbor and God.

The second example James offers to encourage his readers is that of Job; this follows a broad reminder that the people remembered as heroes-of-the-faith within the Jewish-Christian mindset are quite often those who were characterized by faithfulness and steadfastness. The writers of the books of Samuel and Kings, for example, evaluate kings of Israel and Judah not in terms of their military successes or accrued wealthy, but praise or condemn rulers on the basis of their faithfulness to Israel's God. In some ways, then, Job fits well into this model, for his story involves endurance through great suffering and eventual vindication. After all, in the Old Testament book of Job, the hero refuses to curse God, even when he questions and debates with this God. (In the extra-canonical book, *The Testament of Job*, with which James may have also been familiar, Job is even more clearly patient, and his wife is made to be the angry questioner).

But the biblical version of the story is a knotty problem for seeing Job as passively patient and stoic in the face of suffering. Rather, the Job the Bible describes, although never cursing God, does an awful lot of pointed questioning and angry doubting. Now, James may not have wanted to mention this part of the story (after all it does complicate things and opens up a whole new can of worms), but since he's made the reference, it is worthy of note that Job's so-called endurance does not mean quiet and unthinking acceptance of life and life's problems. Job gets angry at the unfairness of his suffering, at the rationalizing of his friends, and at the silence of his God. So even if James doesn't talk about it explicitly, this seems to be a faithful part of our patient waiting for the Lord. And even though James doesn't make this move, the God James describes is certainly big enough to take our questions and doubts and anger as we wait for God to act or to answer prayer when answers do not come as we might wish. Just as with the example of the prophets, Job's story suggests that our waiting is not done in stoic silence—we are not called to bear

all of life's hardships with a stiff upper lip, nor are we called to keep silent in the face of injustice, sin, and idolatry (in all their insidious forms).

If anything, the story of Job gives not so much a picture of patient and content waiting as it shows a God who eventually does come and set things right. By answering Job in the end, even though Job doesn't get a good answer to why he suffers, God vindicates Job's plea for things to be set right. And James wants to pick up on this theme from the Job story as well as from the collective witness of the prophets. God, then, is the third example who gives us encouragement to wait with patient endurance. This example is not that of a role model per se, like the prophets or Job, but rather is evidence that we can trust God to ultimately set the universe right. We know "the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful," and so we can wait with patience (as well as with prophetic urgency and honest questioning) because we know that the God who will bring creation to its fulfillment is truly merciful and gracious. How do we "know" this about God? At one level, we know it from the past and from our stories about this God—stories about God's ultimate faithfulness to the prophets and to Job, about God's mercy on Israel, about God's promise to Abraham, and about God's goodness to all creation.

But James may also think that we "know" God's compassion and mercy in community—in our identity as the people of God. Earlier in the book, James had made mention of the fulfillment of the "purpose" of God, and it was in reference to being made a part of the new community of faith to be the "first fruits of his creatures." In other words, we know God as good and gracious not only from the past acts of God but also by God's present actions in our midst to make us into a new people. And both of those give us hope for God to act in the future to set all things right.

❖ Themes—“The Purpose of God”

As he counsels his readers to have a patient trust in God, he reminds them that they “have seen purpose of God” and known God to be compassionate and merciful. The idea of God’s *purpose* for and in creation has come up repeatedly in James. He sees all the universe as within God’s design, and he sees life in the community of faith as the result of divine purpose. But again, the English word “purpose” only gets at part of the idea in Greek—the word “telos” conveys the idea of maturity and completion or of reaching a goal. There is a sense in the word of something reaching the fullness of what it is meant to be. In some ways, the whole book of James has been centered around God’s desire to bring all creation to that “telos,” to that purpose and completion. Part of it involves the individual practices of the community known as the church, its leaders, and its various members. Part of James’ talk of divine purpose is about the return of the Lord and the consummation of all things.

These two are inseparable—God has it in mind to remake all of creation and to restore wholeness to all of this fractured world, and yet that also means the hope of wholeness for individuals as they seek to be aligned with the Reign of God within the community of faith. If we only focus on the individual element of God’s “purpose,” we can easily reduce faith to moralizing or a scheme for *me* to get the good life. And yet if we dwell only the cosmic, future aspects of God’s design and purpose for the universe, we can forget that God offers not an abstract design or order but real wholeness for *me*, for *us* as the people of God. But when we hold these together, we can see the “telos” of God, God’s design and reign over the universe to bring it to completion, as both gracious and merciful. Or as Paul Achtemeier puts it, with those two together we can recognize that “grace...is God’s act of exercising his lordship over creation.”

James 5:12-20—The Prayer and Community of Faith

Connections: Hopeful Waiting

- Can waiting be active rather than passive? What does this look like? What has been a time in your life of active waiting?
- What do you think “the coming of the Lord” meant for James? What does it suggest to you? What shapes your vision of it?
- How might it be a *faithful* response to be angry at God or to question God? Can we trust beyond our questioning?
- What tells you the most about who God is and what God is like? Personal experience? The Bible? Your gut feelings? What different pictures do each of these sources paint about who God is? Where might James point us to see and learn the character of God?

❖ The Text (NRSV)

¹²*Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your “Yes” be yes and your “No” be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.*

¹³*Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise.* ¹⁴*Are any among your sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord.*

¹⁵*The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven.*

¹⁶*Therefore confess your sins to one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.*

¹⁷*Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth.* ¹⁸*Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.*

¹⁹*My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another,* ²⁰*you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.*

❖ **What's going on here?**

-v.12—The transitional phrase, “above all,” suggests that we’re moving toward the end of the whole book, although it doesn’t necessarily mean that this is the most important piece of advice in the whole book (much as Paul’s “finally” in Philippians 4:8 doesn’t have a very *final* quality to it when the letter goes on for another 15 verses—it is a transitional phrases that indicates moving toward closure). In any case, the following material is important for James and caps off his thoughts on the power of human speech. James says the faithful should not make oaths but rather should have such an integrity of character that *all* their speech is truthful *all* the time. The command to “let your ‘Yes’ be yes and your ‘No’ be no” echoes almost word for word the saying of Jesus in Matthew 5:33-37. Both may be concerned that some do not feel bound to fulfill certain oaths, depending on what object or person is invoked in the oath (Jesus includes swearing by “heaven” or “Jerusalem” or one’s own head, for example, beyond just swearing by God). But what seems to be foremost for James (and for Jesus as well, presumably) is that the people of God be a truthful people. The practice of swearing suggests that whatever is said “under oath” is somehow more truthful than other speech, but Jesus and James call for a more radical honesty, such that *everything* we say is honest. Moreover, since, as Jesus puts it, we “cannot make one hair [on our head] white or black,” by our swearing, we need to have a humility that recognizes that my swearing something doesn’t make it so any more than my simple promise. As James had said in 4:13ff, we cannot presume that whatever we declare will come true, even by swearing an oath. Rather, all we can do is to be faithful to our word and let there be a wholeness in our speech, belief, and action.

-v.13-16—In these verses, James envisions the entire life of the community as oriented to God in prayer. In other words, *whatever* is going on in the church and in the life of the believer is grounds for communion and

communication with God. For those suffering hardships (as James had opened his letter with in 1:2-4), they should—like Job (5:11) lift their concerns to God in prayer. For those who are “cheerful,” the appropriate response is also prayer/song directed to God. In a way, James is echoing the counsel of Paul to 1 Thess. 5:17-18 to “pray unceasingly,” both see the whole life of faith, for the individual as well as for the community, as lived in constant conversation with God.

Prayer, then, is more than our asking God for what we want (James has had something to say about that in 4:2-3), but includes lament in suffering and praise for God’s gifts. There is *nothing* that falls outside the realm of prayer, since for James there is nothing in life that falls outside the Reign of God. God is at work in and through all of our lives and calls us to new patterns and actions in every facet of our lives, and so every part of who we are can be taken “to the Lord in prayer.”

With this sweeping orientation of all of life toward communication with God in prayer, James sees the needs of the sick and the confession of sin as related. Both are instances where we are broken in some way and turn to God to be made whole and well again. This is not to say that James connects every physical malady (or even any) to an act of sin against God—rather he simply sees both as occasions in which prayer to God is an appropriate response.

James also sees prayer as a *communal* response to life’s events—we are to pray for *each other*, and the leaders of the church are to come and pray for *others* who are sick. James does not equate prayer with a magic spell that the individual wields to get whatever is desired, but rather sees it as part of the community’s response and responsibility as we love each other. When another is in need, of course we are called on to pray, just as we celebrate and praise when good things come. Remembering what James had said throughout chapter two, though, prayer cannot be mere lip service that absolves us from response to the other in action.

Rather, prayer is part of our whole life as a community to address the needs of others—to weep with those who weep and to rejoice with those who rejoice, as Paul says in Romans 12.

-v.17-18—James gives an example of the power of the prayer of faith in the figure of Elijah. While the Old Testament narrative does not specifically mention Elijah’s prayer to stop the rain, James has picked up this tradition and used it to offer Elijah as another example or hero-of-faith to give encouragement for his readers, much as he had in 5:10-11. What is especially significant for James is that Elijah is simply “a human being like us”—Elijah is not endowed with supernatural powers, but simply trusts in an amazing God. This is an important point for reflection on what is often called “the power of prayer:” the *power* is not located in the words as though they were magical, or even within the one praying, as though it were a reward for being pious enough (although James hints at this possibility). But these statements on prayer need to be read again in the context of the whole document, which repeatedly identifies *God* as the source of all good giving, rather than our deserving or the strength of our believing. This is the thrust of the example of Elijah, who was seen as a monumental figure of faith and commitment to God in the Old Testament, but whom James wants to identify as “a human being like us.” The great miracle of prayer is not to be located in extraordinary people but in the extraordinary God who is faithful, “compassionate,” and “merciful” and who amazingly works through and for the benefit of ordinary people.

-v.19-20—These last words of advice about mutual correction and guidance seem an odd way to end a book or a letter. There is no personal greeting or farewell, no blessing, nor any doxology to God, as we find in other New Testament writings. And again, we are led to wonder whether we have just an independent saying tacked on to a long anthology of other independent sayings. And yet these words about helping bring back those members of the community who have fallen away—or as James puts it, “wandered

from the truth”—seem in some sense a fitting end for the book. They summarize perhaps what the author has intended to do for his audience in the whole book—to offer a voice of guidance in familial love for life in the community of faith. James has spent plenty of time calling out the various ways we turn from God by turning from our neighbors, and consistently, he has offered us the hope and challenge of turning a new way—into the completion and wholeness of life that God desires for all creation. The idea of “bringing back a sinner” and “covering up a multitude of sins” may not sound as Christ-focused as we might hope (wouldn’t it be nice if James ended with a remark about how *Jesus* has covered up our sins and brought us back already?), and yet James is ever concerned with the practical and this-worldly realities of what Christ has done and what it looks like in our communities. How will we manifest the reconciliation and restoring work of Christ? James invites us to see us as Christs for each other, bringing each other back and embodying the ‘heartbreak beginning to heal’ that is the continuing life of the people of God. James has continued to hold out that at the last, God will bring wholeness and completion for all creation, and in the mean time, we are to live as witnesses and first-fruit people who embody that wholeness and restoration for each other and the world now.

Connections: Life Together

-Who have been people in your life who you have looked to as great examples of faith? What about them stood out—were they heroes or everyday folk, or somehow both?

-James ends the book with an invitation to help bring back those who wander—what might that look like? How can this be healthy? How might this be abused and made overly rigid and narrow?

-How would Christian life and faith be different if we did not live within a faith community? Can we be Christians alone? Why or why not?