

Wait on the Lord

James 5:7-10

⁷ Be 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. ⁸ You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. ⁹ Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! ¹⁰ As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

This has been an interesting week! Let me tell you about a few experiences and conversations I have had. On Tuesday I returned to Goodwill after taking Leroy to see his doctor, to witness an ambulance and fire department truck on the premises. I learned one of our trainees had had an apparent heart attack while working and was not in good condition. The following day his counselor said she knew when she had spoken to me the previous day that the situation was hopeless and the trainee had died. I asked if she would attend the grief session and she reported she might do an individual counseling session later. That Wednesday night I attend our agency holiday dinner and noticed the president of Goodwill was especially sensitive and grieved by the trainee's death...it was something he said during his remarked that made us all know his grief. On Thursday a coworker seemed to want to talk about the death, but I soon discovered she had her own grief as this would be the first Christmas since the death of her beloved husband! She described her grief, anger, sadness, and yet, thankfulness that she had years of his love. I went back to her later in the day to check on her and offered a listening ear when needed. I got a call from one of our members on Thursday to tell me she had been in the hospital and is having heart and eye challenges, unrelated to her heart valve or cataract surgeries. On Friday Leroy saw his dentist because those new dentures aren't serving as they should! Not to mention the pharmacy gave him another patient's medication and neither had noticed. On yesterday I attended the funeral of Del Wisecarver, who was president of Goodwill when I started my career there. There I saw a former supervisor who now has the residuals of a stroke, but he remembered me! However, his wife is grieving that they will have to give up their "dream home" because

Marty will not be able to continue to care for the 9-acre property. Then my current supervisor told me the man who was so grieved on Wednesday has his own grief as he has throat cancer! When I arrived home my neighbor needed to talk about her challenges of caring for her husband who has ALS. She too is not only grieving his health, but they will need to move to a place with space for his wheelchair to maneuver. All this happened from Tuesday to Saturday. That had nothing to do with the other issues and challenges I know about with family, friends and colleagues. So, it is not surprising that I need a lesson on patience, endurance and hope during these times!

Many of us grew up with the adage "Patience is a virtue." It comes to mind as we read the opening words of our text from James: "Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord." The author compares the patience he encourages to the patience of the farmer who waits for "the early and the late rains." Then, as the passage ends at verse 10, the author connects patience with suffering: "As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord." What do patience, suffering, and farming have to do with one another and with the season of Advent?

First of all, the text raises the question: In what circumstances is it appropriate to urge people to be patient? When is patience a virtue? Certain kinds of work require patience. Mr. Wisecarver was trained as an industrial engineer, and had taught at Little Rock High School. At his funeral there were two pictures of his projects; one a sewing machine table and the other a chest of drawers. These required patience to build. Also, the woodworker refinishing a piece of furniture, the jewelry repairer fixing a broken clasp, the quilter carefully stitching fabric, the accountant running trial balances to make sure all records are accurate: all of these must work carefully and patiently, because precision and accuracy are demanded by the work they do. Learning various things often requires patience: years of finger exercises precede playing Bach or Mozart; time on the driving range is needed to master a good golf swing; memorization and repetition

are required to learn any new language. All of us understand this kind of patience—the "practice-makes-perfect" kind.

Patience can also be a virtue in situations where waiting is required and where one is essentially powerless to change the circumstances: sitting in the car on the freeway during rush hour, standing in the seemingly interminable security line at the airport, waiting in the checkout line at the grocery store at 5:00 p.m. with a checker who is learning how to run the cash register. Thankfully now there are self check-out lines in many places, but it still takes patience when you get in line after a beginner to the service. In these situations, there is an unavoidable delay. Try as we may, we can exert no control over some important factors in our lives. You can either get angry and fret and feel your blood pressure rise, as Leroy did on yesterday as we picked up an electronic at Best Buy, or you can be patient. This aggravating wait is familiar to all of us.

The example that the author of James uses is a patience more like this second type. The author is thinking of dry-land farming in Palestine before the modern invention of drip irrigation that has turned this semiarid region into productive farmland. In classic dry-land farming, such as the way wheat is grown in the land behind and beside the church most years, whether or not there is a crop depends almost entirely on how much moisture falls, in what form, and at what time. There must be rain when the crop is put in to germinate the seed and then rains later to nourish the crop. However, when rain (or worse yet, hail) comes just before harvest, the results can be disastrous. Since there is nothing the farmer can do about this, you learn one way or the other how to wait.

Patience is sometimes but not always virtuous but how does it relate to suffering? We assume that the author is thinking about the suffering of the early Christian community as it was dealing with persecution, poverty, and marginalization. In all probability, the community was so small that resistance was impractical; patience was an appropriate stance only because the situation was truly beyond their control. This is advice for how to wait out the immediate situation of injustice.

When the author combines suffering and patience, he does so by pointing to "the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord." If anything, this must be an example of "impatient patience." Think of the deep yearning of Isaiah for days of renewal for Israel or the longing of the psalmists who cry out, "How long, O Lord!" While the prophets who called Israel to repent in the face of oncoming disaster were not anxious to see the destruction of their people, they were not content to be "patient" while the people ignored their calls to repent and reform. Whether the "Day of the Lord" was a day of judgment or redemption, the prophets of Israel waited with impatient patience even in the midst of suffering, knowing that, whatever it brought, that day would be "the Lord's."

Similarly, the author urges those who wait to keep in mind the "long view." The end point is the "coming of the Lord." This author is filled with anticipation that God will keep God's promise to renew and restore creation, to vindicate and redeem God's people, to set right all that is wrong—and that God will do this soon, within the lifetime of both author and readers. Centuries have passed and the end of days has not come, but the season of Advent is the time when the church chooses to keep alive the hope that God is not finished either with creation or with human history, that God is present and active in our lives and in the life of the world to bring about the purposes that God intends. **Cynthia M. Campbell**

Besides practicing patience, James prescribes a second spiritual exercise while we wait: "Strengthen your hearts," he urges; the reason is the same as the reason for patience: "The Lord is near" (v. 8). By now, we realize that the word "near" in an eschatological sense does not mean "soon," as we think of soon. Whatever the length of time we have to wait, heart strength will be essential to our survival. The Letter of James was addressed to communities who, like ours, lived in a culture that gave little heed to the values of the Christian tradition or to the good news of Jesus Christ. If having a strong heart spiritually is in any way comparable to having a healthy cardiovascular system in one's physical body, then exercise must be a part of it. You

cannot stand against the forces of evil, indifference, or oppression with sagging faith, puny hope, or on-again-off-again love.

One way you strengthen your heart as we wait is to avoid "grumbling against one another." What an odd and yet appropriate exhortation. Survival over the long haul requires patience, not only with the Lord who will return in God's own good time, but with each other, lest you destroy the community that holds you up during the waiting.

Another reason not to grumble is that others will judge you and, in you, the Christ whom you claim to serve. In these between times, how do people know what Christ is like, if not through you? There is only the body of Christ to witness to his lordship and his love.

The most important reason not to grumble while we wait, however, is that God will judge you for it. As a matter of fact, "the Judge is standing at the doors!" (v. 9). If you do not want to be judged by the Judge, you had best leave judgment of others to the Judge as well. The day of salvation is near, and when that day comes, the Lord will take care of everything and everybody. Until then, the thing for you and me to do is to attend to the sinner who lives under your own hat.

Finally, the writer advises the people to allow the prophets of old to be their role models in "suffering and patience." He is not suggesting suffering for the sake of suffering, but suffering as the often-inevitable consequence of being true to God in an alien or indifferent environment. If the prophets had to pay through suffering, then let the same be so with you. There are some things worse than suffering, and even death. One of them is losing your soul.

Members of our congregations are not likely to be stoned, beheaded, or burned at the stake any time soon, but today's believers live as much under the imperative of faithfulness as did our courageous ancestors whom we know from Scripture, history, and, in many instances, the stories our families tell. For some of you it is a story of a family member who worked for justice and once risked his life for a minority friend in the segregated South or industrial North. These relatives may have been dead for

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decades when the civil rights laws were finally passed, but when they were on this earth, they made sure their hearts were strong and did what they could to see that little shoots of hope grew in the rocky, clay soil of their time. Their memory can genuinely inspire current and future generations and teach that there really is a kingdom coming in which all God's people are worthy of respect.

One commentator once heard about a woman who had, in spite of a hard life and virtually no resources except her stamina and the strength of her faith, raised six fine children and sent them all to college. Asked how she did it, she replied, "I saw a new world coming."

Most of us do not have an innate inclination to patience. We are overwhelmed with the challenges and issues of our lives. But we know that if the Lord has made a promise, you can bet your life it will come true. Like the tiny shoots of green that appear in the soil after the first rain, there are signs all around that what has been promised is already being fulfilled. Signs of the nearness of salvation are visible already. Let us hold on to the vision and live in love until the Lord comes again. **Joanna M. Adams**

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