

James' Letter

11: Patience and Perseverance

We now move into the ninth main teaching of James' letter where Christians are called to press on in life waiting with hope for the return of their King. There are times in life where we are mistreated by the people around us, and we often want to fight back and defend ourselves by taking matters into our own hands. However, James has already pointed out that our anger and bitterness does not produce the kind of life that God desires (1:20).

Instead, followers of Christ must learn to be patient when they are mistreated and must learn to persevere in the midst of whatever they may have to go through in this life.

James writes in a very straightforward manner saying:

"Be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand."
(5:8)

To establish your heart means to strengthen it by setting your focus on something that is certain. And so according to James, the way to handle mistreatment and tough seasons in this life is to resist bitterness and to be patient instead.

As followers of Christ, we should set our focus on the fact that one day he is going to return and on that day, he will make everything right again.

In this passage, there are only five verses, and yet there are seven references to patience, waiting and steadfastness. And James attempts to drive this point home with an example from agriculture and an example from human history.

An Example from Agriculture

In calling followers of Christ to endure things in life with patience, James first uses a very easy to understand example from farming and agriculture.

A farmer does not plant his crop and then expect to immediately harvest it. Nor does he plant his crop and then attempt to force it to grow. He works hard, but then he also has to wait on things that are out of his control to produce a good crop before the time of the harvest.

First century farmers in Israel were forced to wait for the autumn rains to come before they could plant their crop. And then they had to wait and hope that the spring rains would come so their crop could grow up before the time to harvest.

James tells us that we have to be patient like the farmer. We must live our lives faithfully by doing the things that God has called us to do, but we must also live our lives with patience trusting God with the things that are out of our control.

A farmer must set his mind and focus on the harvest. If he spends his time worrying about the weather and wondering when it's going to rain and why it's not raining yet and this kind of stuff then he will become bitter and frustrated. He must set his mind and focus on the harvest and be patient with the process.

In the same way, we must set our mind and focus on the return of our King. If we spend our time worrying about things out of our control and wondering why certain things are happening the way that they are then we too will become bitter and frustrated in life.

Have you ever become a bitter person because of a certain roster move that was out of your control? Have you ever become a bitter person because of an unfortunate injury or a season that just didn't go like you thought it should go? Do other people make you bitter? Do the media or fans ever make you bitter? When you feel mistreated or disrespected or frustrated with the way things are going in your life, is your immediate reaction one of bitterness and doing what you can to fight back and make yourself feel better?

James is telling us to resist bitterness and persevere with peace and confidence. A peace and confidence in a promise from God that our King will return one day and on that day will make everything in life right again.

We must set our mind and focus on that day that Jesus will make everything right and be patient with the process. We can't always control the way things work out in this life, but we can always control our preparation and response.

Take ownership of what you can control and trust God with everything that you can't. Don't put all your chips on this life, set them securely on the life to come.

C.S. Lewis offers us some encouragement in his book *Mere Christianity*:

"If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth "thrown in": aim at earth and you will get neither."

An Example from History

Resist bitterness and stay focused on the that day that our King will return and establish the eternal life that we were all made for. C.S. Lewis has given us an example of the different ways this mindset has changed the world, and James gives us an example from history of how God blesses and rewards the patience and perseverance of his people.

James writes:

"As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, look at the prophets of ancient history who spoke in the name of the Lord and behold that we consider those blessed who remained steadfast." (5:10-11)

When we experience some hard times in life, James wants us to remember that God is not against us, and he is not trying to make life hard for us. God is compassionate, and he is merciful. He uses the difficult things that we go through in this life to help us develop the kind of character that were created to have and to help us set our hearts and minds on the eternal life that we were created to experience.

Study the life of his prophets in the Old Testament, and you will see the kind of patience and perseverance that God desires his people to possess. These men had very difficult lives and struggled through some really hard times in life, and yet they continued to resist being bitter because they kept looking forward to the day that God was going to do what he said he would do.

And while James tells us to look at the lives of the Old Testament prophets, the author of Hebrews encourages us to endure everything that happens in this life by also looking at the life of Jesus.

He writes:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1-2)

We are to look at the example set by God's people throughout history, but more than anything else, we are to look to the example set by Jesus our King. Jesus willingly embraced a life that led to the shame and suffering that comes with execution on a Roman cross. And he endured all this patiently and without ever becoming bitter because he knew what God had in store for him and he trusted God's plan.

Jesus had set his focus on the promises of God and didn't waver when things got tough. Jesus was patient, and Jesus was the epitome of perseverance. And that is why James tells us, "You also, be patient. Stop getting so rattled. Set your focus on what God has done for you and what he desires for you and what he has promised to you. Resist bitterness and be patient instead because a day is coming when the King will return. And on that day we will rejoice, and the world will be made right."

Will you be waiting for him and will you be ready?