

Observations from a Farm

Endurance-Part One

James 5:7-9

During the average lifetime, I have read, a person will spend two years calling people who aren't home, three years in meetings and five years waiting in line. That struck me . . . five years waiting in line!

No one likes to wait. I don't like missing a green light or an elevator . . . waiting for even one minute is agonizing.

I was driving around Baltimore and the DC area this past week, coming back from speaking at a couple of Bible Colleges in their chapel sessions and a large digital sign over the interstate flashed, "Delay in 8 miles". I could see brake lights ahead and knew the delay could cost me an hour or more.

I saw on my car rental's GPS system that a nearby road ran parallel with the interstate, so I took the next exit and forced the lady with the British accent to stop repeating "make a legal u-turn".

I took that side road for ten miles, hopped back on the interstate and lost only four minutes in the process. I considered that one of the highlight of my trip!

The truth is we are by nature, impatient. Whether it's a faster internet connection, a pill that avoids changed habits by promising immediate weight loss; financial schemes to get rich quick, or whatever; endurance is something we admire in other people, but we really don't want to cultivate in ourselves.

We would rather master the art of shortcuts.

We want things on our own timetable and we want to manage the clock, and we learn that early on.

I read an article the other day about a first grade teacher who had an interesting interaction

on the first day of school. Accustomed to going home at noon in kindergarten, a little boy named Ryan was getting his things together to leave for home when he was supposed to be getting ready to go with the class to lunch. Linda asked him what he was doing. He said, "I'm going home." She gently explained to him that he was now in the first grade and he would now have a longer school day. She said, "You'll go eat lunch now, and then you'll come back to the room and do some more work before you go home." Ryan looked up at her in disbelief, hoping she was kidding. Finally convinced she was serious, he looked up at her and said, "Who on earth signed me up for this program?"¹

Poor kid . . . "I don't want the agony of school to go past noon . . . I didn't sign up for this!"

As James, the half-brother of our Lord, moves into his final comments in his letter to dispersed believers—keep in mind he's writing to Christians who hadn't signed up for what they were enduring.

They were exiled by the Roman emperor Claudius and they have been unable to return home. They hadn't expected the difficulties to last this long.

So in the closing chapter of James letter, he begins to encourage them to persevere . . . to stay the course . . . to stick it out . . . to stay in the race.

A key word that came to my mind as I read and re-read the closing comments from James was one word: endurance.

- slugging through it with commitment and character;
- when there is no shortcut in sight;

- when you can't manage the clock;
- when life doesn't fit your plans;
- when there's no alternate road to get you around the traffic jam of difficult circumstances . . . and life itself.

Maybe you're there right now.

You might agree now more than ever with the statement by Wilson Mizner who wrote, "Life is a tough proposition, and the first hundred years are the hardest."ⁱⁱ

What an insightful way to put the truth. The first 100 years are tough!

One of my commentaries on the Book of James included the story of the doctor who called his patient on the phone and said, "Listen, I've got some bad news, and some really bad news, for you." The man gulped and said, "Well, give me just the bad news first." The doctor said, "You only have 24 hours to live." The man replied, "That's terrible news . . . what could be worse than that?" The doctor said, "Well, I was supposed to call you yesterday." Sometimes life is like that, isn't it? One day is bad, but the next day is even worse.ⁱⁱⁱ

What kind of inspired advice would God deliver to believers back in the 1st century and today in the 21st century—believers who are living through some of their worst days and with no sign of letting up?

Christians who might very well be tempted to say, "Who in the world signed me up for this program?"

Well, to them and us, James will deliver in this next paragraph in **chapter 5** a series of imperatives, some incentives and some wonderful examples to follow.

James writes in chapter 5 and verse 7, *Therefore, be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord.*

Here's an imperative from James. ***Be patient*** exclamation point!

Greek scholars point out the difference between this word for patience and the word used earlier in chapter 1 where James wrote that we should let trials have their perfecting work which produces patience.

The word James uses here refers to refusing to retaliate for being mistreated "a long holding out of the mind before giving way to action or eruption in protest."^{iv}

In our last study we saw James describe the mistreatment of the poor by the rich, the rich

controlled the courts and committed judicial murder.

That is, they withheld the payment owed to poor day laborers, then manipulated the courts and literally removed the ability of the poor to defend themselves or even to make a living.

No doubt there were many in this audience who would have immediately responded to James description, there were no doubt day laborers in this congregation if not the majority of them. They were not the abusers, they were the abused.

They had been exiled from Rome, mistreated by all, and many if not all of them ruined financially.

No wonder James follows up that paragraph with these words, in **verse 7, *"Therefore, be patient."***

Don't lash out or strike back. But Lord this is unjust! It's not fair! Will you ever make things right?

James anticipates that response and follows up this exhortation with the ultimate anticipation notice **verse 7b. *until the coming of the Lord . . . the Lord is coming!***

Three times in these three verses James refers to Jesus Christ's return. The last part of **verse 8 – *The Lord is near.*** The last part of **verse 9 – *The Judge is standing right at the door.*** He's already on the threshold.

This is the ultimate incentive for endurance through the mistreatments and sufferings of life – Jesus Christ is coming back!

This is what theologians call the *parousia* of Christ.

The word translated "**coming**" in **verse 7** is the Greek word ***parousia*** (παρουσία).^v

It's the most common term used throughout the New Testament for the coming of Christ the *parousia* of Christ.

We know that the *parousia* will be in two phases—the first phase will be to take away the church from the promised tribulation wrath of God which will be poured out as promised upon the planet; the second phase of the *parousia* will be to return with the redeemed and establish a literal 1,000 year kingdom era upon earth as Christ rules and we with Him.

As the New Testament unfolds, James being the very first in the New Testament canonical Books, the coming of Christ will be expanded and defined.

What James did reveal here are two prophetic truths:

1. First, the coming of Christ is imminent.

In other words, it could happen at any moment.

James writes, *He is near—He is standing at the door!* From James generation to ours, there has never been one event standing in the way of Christ returning for His church.

All the Apostles spoke with this truth in mind:

- *“The night is almost gone and the day is near,”* Paul wrote in *Romans 13:12*;
- the writer of Hebrews exhorted his readers not to skip church – the assembly – *but to be encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near (Hebrews 10:25)*;
- Peter wrote, *“The end of all things is near (1 Peter 4:7)*;
- the Apostle John wrote in *1 John 2:18*, *“Children, it is the last hour.”*

The coming of Christ is imminent!

2. Secondly, James encourages the believers to anticipate being rescued from suffering.

Throughout the New Testament, the believers are never told to prepare to experience the wrath of God through seven years of tribulation, but to prepare to see Christ.

The joyful incentive for the believer to endure mistreatment and stay the course of suffering through this present church age makes no sense if the coming of God’s wrath is next.

The believer is not given one verse on how to survive the tribulation explosion of wrath as promised in the Book of Revelation.

James is effectively saying, “Stay the course . . .” not because at any moment seven really horrific years of enduring God’s wrath will be unleashed upon you—no. He says, “Persevere, endure, hold your course . . . your King will soon deliver you.”

Christ could come at any moment.

What’s next for the believers of this age? Paul wrote, *“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time (not the sufferings of the*

tribulation – but the sufferings of this present time) they are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18)

In other words, this is all the suffering we will encounter and it can’t compare to the glory when Christ raptures us away.

G. Campbell Morgan, the wonderful British expositor from the last century wrote, “[The thought of the] coming of Christ is the light on the path which makes the present bearable. I never lay my head on my pillow without thinking that maybe before morning dawns, [that] morning will have dawned; I never begin my work in the morning without thinking that perhaps He may interrupt my work and begin His own.”^{vi}

So just how do we live in the meantime?

James answers that question by taking us to a farm, by way of illustration.

Notice the middle part of *verse 7*. *The farmer waits for the precious produce of the soil, being patient about it, until it gets the early and late rains.*

Many believe that James actually spent some time farming, along with his brother Jude who also wrote a letter in our New Testament.

James obviously understood the process well as he refers to the early and latter rains.

The early rains were anxiously awaited by the farmer in James day because, among other things, they softened the hard-baked soil for plowing and sowing by hand. The latter rains were necessary to mature the crops – the longer those rains continued, the greater the potential yield.^{vii}

In between the rainy seasons they weeded and hoed and fertilized and whatever else they could do to bring their corps to fruition.

I don’t know anything about farming other than I am incredibly grateful that there are farmers who do.

My father grew up on a farm in Minnesota until he entered the ministry after getting out of the Air Force and going to Bible College.

At different times he would tell us, his four sons, stories from life on the farm.

All the stories made me even happier that he went into the ministry and didn’t stay a farmer.

I can remember hearing that my father’s day, as a boy, began much earlier than mine ever did.

And as hard as it was to feed and water my one dog, I couldn't imagine milking a dozen cows by hand at 5 a.m. in Minnesota when the weather was 5 degrees below zero. And then after milking the cows he had to walk over a mile to school in the snow and shoot a rabbit on the way for lunch.

Okay, I made that last part up; but all the other parts are true.

When we complained about the lunch our mother was fixing us, he told us that he carried in his pocket to school a raw potato and a little pad of butter wrapped up . . . when he arrived at that one-room schoolhouse, he and the other farm boys would put their potato's on top of that black wood burning stove which kept the schoolhouse warm. By lunchtime the potato would be ready to eat and that was his lunch.

How do you complain about your lunch after that story?

Frankly, the older I get the more I love to hear those stories.

I can't imagine a more difficult life than farming, and I am so grateful for those who do it for all of us.

But the most difficult thing about farming isn't the physical labor, but the mental wear and tear. You never know what the weather is going to do.

That's James exact point here. He references the patience of farmers and immediately talks about the weather.

And we can make some immediate observations from James illustration.

- Farmers work hard with things under their control. They plant, weed, fertilize—a farmer doesn't sit on his hands and expect a crop.
- Farmers have to depend on some things entirely outside their control . . . like rain.
- The farmer's patience doesn't come from doing nothing but from understanding his limitations.^{viii}
- Another observation of a farmer is that even if it rains, after doing everything he can possibly do, he has no visible indication that anything's happening.^{ix}
- Yet another observation we can make from the farm is that even with a bumper

crop the farmer has to do the same thing all over again.

There's not a farmer alive who plants one crop and expects to have food for the rest of his life. So it is in the Christians life.^x

So, stay the course . . . do the right thing . . . fertilize your spiritual walk with discipline . . . plant in your heart the seeds of God's truth.

Then resist the temptation to say, "Okay, Lord, I did that!"

Hear the Lord through James respond, "Do it again . . . and again . . . and again."

Farmers understand that truth.

I know a businessman who spends some of his vacation time each summer volunteering to work on a large farm. He told me that when he slips into the seat of that tractor, his perspectives in life gets readjusted back to where they ought to be.

Farming is the perfect metaphor for that daily persistent endurance of combining everything you can do for God while at the same time trusting Him to do for you what only He can do.

In fact, James will even further emphasize the responsibility of the believer to endure—notice the next verse, *verse 8, You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.*

James adds the thought of strengthening your own hearts. More literally, "make firm your hearts or even, prop up your heart." James is urging the believer as a decisive act to strengthen and make firm their inner life.^{xi}

In a number of New Testament passages, this is described as the work of God. He strengthens our hearts (*1 Peter 5:10 and 2 Thessalonians 2:17*), but James presents this as our due diligence.

He tells the suffering believer to literally prop up their hearts with the promise of Christ's soon return.^{xii}

Nowhere is the believer given the suggestion that what he needs to do is put on a white robe, climb some hill and wait for Jesus to return.^{xiii}

Endurance means there's a battle to face—a challenge to meet.

One author wrote, "Did you ever notice that when the Lord told Peter and the other discouraged fishermen to cast their nets again, it was right in that same place where they had been working all night and had caught nothing? If we could only go off to some new place every time

we got discouraged, trying again would be an easier thing to do. If we could be somebody else, or go somewhere else, or do something else, it might not be so hard to have fresh [resolve]. But it is the same old net in the same old place. The old temptations are to be battled, the old faults to be faced; the old trials and discouragements before which we failed yesterday are to be faced again today. And Jesus speaks the word – let down your nets again . . . try again.^{xiv}

And while you're at it, don't take out your frustration on the other fishermen—don't make them your problem.

Notice what James says next in *verse 9*. ***Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged.***

Impatience with God often leads to impatience with God's people.^{xv}

Don't grumble against one another, brethren. Times were tough . . . their culture was cruel . . . and their feelings were frayed.

Our tendency is to take out our frustration on anyone near us. You come home from work, bark at the dog, kick at the cat, and snap at the kids. They're not the problem . . . they just got in the line of fire.

The problem is actually a little deeper than that. The word James uses for complain can actually be translated "groan".

It refers to feelings that very well may be internal and never expressed. It can refer to the carrying of a grudge against someone that is kept within.^{xvi}

The tense of the verb indicates that this was actually taking place among the believers. So James is literally telling them to stop it.

Just as their incentive for staying the course is the coming of Christ their Lord, so here, the incentive for not harboring bitter judgments against other believers is—notice at the end of verse 9, ***behold, the Judge is standing right at the door.***

In other words, be gracious and patient with others because one day soon the thoughts and actions and reactions of every believer will be judged by our Lord at the Bema seat where we will give an accounting (*1 Corinthians 3*).

And in that accounting, we will no doubt be ashamed of things we kept inside us and things we did outside us—praise God the blood of

Christ has already paid the penalty for all our sin.

But we will all wish I'm sure that more of what we thought and more of what we said and more of what we did was worthy of being rewarded as Christ our Lord rewards us at the Bema seat for those things which were indeed profitable (*2 Corinthians 5:10*).

All of life should be lived with the perspective of the parousia. Jesus Christ is coming for us.

And that perspective accomplishes two things. It **encourages us** when we're beaten and tired and mistreated—this is temporary.

But it also **reminds us** to stay the course, to live right, and to please Christ because He will in grace one day reward us.

As I studied this text I found this interesting . . . the word "coming" – parousia – back in *verse 7* includes the idea of *presence*.

Not just that Christ is literally coming one day, but that His coming is so certain that He is spoken of as already present. And indeed He is.

During your toughest assignment He's present. During your worst suffering He's at hand; during episodes of mistreatment and maligning He's aware, and He's available to join you in the strengthening of your heart as you do your part, and He does His.

Eugene Peterson paraphrased that classic text of Christ our High priest in *Hebrews 4:16 to read, we don't have a [high] priest who is out of touch with our reality. He's been through weakness and testing, experienced it all—but the sin. So let's walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take [His] mercy, accept [His] help.*

One author illustrated this truth by writing about a personal encounter with a fellow student who was blind. His name was John, and I spent a couple of hours a week reading to him. One day I asked him how he lost his sight. He told me of an accident that happened when he was a teenager and how, at that point, he had simply given up on life. "When the accident happened and I knew I would never see again, I felt that life had ended, as far as I was concerned. I was bitter and angry with God for letting it happen, and I took my anger out on everyone around me.

I felt that since I had no future, I wouldn't lift a finger on my own behalf. Let others wait on

me. I shut my bedroom door and refused to come out except for meals.

The author interjects here—this young man I knew was an eager learner and an earnest student, so I had to ask what had changed his attitude. He told me this story. “One day, in exasperation, my father came into my room and started giving me a lecture. He said he was tired of my feeling sorry for myself. He said that winter was coming, and it was still my job to put up the storm windows. He yelled, “You get those windows up by suppertime tonight” and he slammed the door on his way out.”

“Well, said John, “that made me so angry that I resolved to do it! Muttering and complaining to myself, I groped my way out to the garage, found the windows, a stepladder, all the necessary tools, and I went to work. They’ll be sorry when I fall off this ladder and break my neck . . . but little by little, groping my way around the house, I got the job done.”

Then he stopped and his sightless eyes misted up as he told me, “I later found out that at no time during the day had my father ever been

more than four or five feet away from my side.”^{xvii}

You might think that James is about as uncaring in his advice as that father was to his blind son.

But both this father and James, although demanding, want nothing more than for us to develop a bumper crop of spiritual fruit—the fruit of godly character and the fruit of godly conduct.

Let me summarize James opening words with a couple of sentences. James opens this paragraph by explicitly and implicitly delivering these challenges to the believer:

- **Develop endurance!**

Develop endurance while you wait for your Lord who is coming to *rapture* you . . . it could be today.

- **Refuse bitterness!**

Refuse bitterness while you wait for your Lord who is coming to *reward* you . . . it could be today.

Start living more like a farmer . . . but live with that final harvest in view.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 05/01/2011 by Stephen Davey.

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i Wanda Vassalio, *Little Boy Just Wants to Go Home*, Christianity Today International/preachingtoday.com

ii Charles R. Swindoll, *Getting Through the Tough Stuff* (W Publishing, 2004), p. ix

iii Tony Evans, *James: The Perfect Christian* (Word Publishing, 1998), p. 207

iv Spiros Zodhiates, *The Patience of Hope: An Exposition of James 4:13-5:20* (AMG Publishers, 1981), p. 77

v Fritz Rienecker/Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Regency, 1976), p. 740

vi Edited from Zodhiates, p. 87

vii D. Edmond Hiebert, *James* (BMH, 2992), p. 271

viii Evans, p. 209

ix Zodhiates, p. 86

x Ibid, p. 210

xi Hiebert, p. 272

xii John MacArthur, *James* (Moody Press, 1998), p. 255

xiii Warren W. Wiersbe, *James: Be Mature* (Victor Books, 1979), p. 156

xiv Zodhiates, p. 88

xv Wiersbe, p. 156

xvi Rienecker, p. 740

xvii Charles R. Swindoll, *Job: A Man of Heroic Endurance* (W Publishing, 2004), p. 224