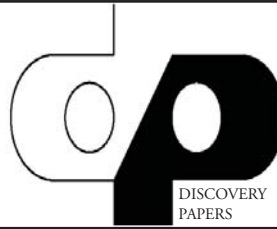


PATIENCE AND PRAYER

SERIES: WISDOM THAT COMES FROM HEAVEN



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James 5:7-20
13th Message
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We have come to the end of our studies in the book of James, and we'll see that the closing verses return to themes we encountered at the beginning. James gives us reasons for hope when we suffer and calls us to pray.

We know only a little from the New Testament about the man who wrote this letter, James the brother of Jesus. However, there is a rather unusual physical description of James dating to the 2nd century written by a man named Hegesippus. Rather than describe his bearing, or stature or facial features, Hegesippus wrote this: "James' knees became hard like camel's knees as the consequence of his habitual supplication and kneeling before God."

James was a man of prayer. His letter begins and ends with instruction on prayer in the context of suffering.

James 5:7-9:

⁷Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. ⁸You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. ⁹Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

We should consider the life of a farmer and learn to wait: be patient, stand firm. The evidence that we have learned patience is, as with James, discernable in our speech, simply stated—'don't grumble.'

'See how the farmer waits.' Life unfolds as one season follows another; rain and drought, planting and reaping. We accept hardships (dry spells) because we know they are part of a fruitful process. I remember when I was in first grade, our teacher gave each student a bean to plant and a Dixie cup filled with dirt. We watered our beans and waited. Eventually a green shoot came up, and then leaves and finally new beans. We were learning James' lesson, 'be patient.'

A human life has seasons as well. A child is cared for by parents who in old age are cared for by their children.

The physical prowess of youth is replaced eventually by the wisdom of age. Parenting an infant is different from parenting a teen. We can't jump over the hard parts and manuals on 'how to avoid difficulty' are not much use. The notion that youth is wasted on the young is repeated by each generation, but it cannot be changed.

We can appreciate the lesson of the farmer (or the Dixie cup). In agriculture hardship is reasonable. Today's dry season will lead to tomorrow's harvest.

However, suffering does not always make sense as we read in the next few verses.

James 5:10-12:

¹⁰Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy. ¹²Above all, my brothers, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned.

Job's suffering was not a dry season between the early and late rains. He experienced wave after wave of tragedy in a swirl of chaos. In times like this, oaths that attempt to harness God to our purpose ("Come hell or high water, by God, I will achieve my goal") are forbidden because we serve God, we do not command him. We have no lever to pull, no means of escape. Like the farmer, Job must also trust God's goodness, but he does not receive an answer to the question, 'why?' In place of answers Job received a glorious vision of God and his questions ceased.

The farmer's experience reminds us of life's seasons. Job's experience paints a picture of pain in chaos. Both are circumstances that require us to trust God, and with these in mind, James now turns to lessons on prayer.

James 5:13-15:

¹³Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise. ¹⁴Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven.

The word translated ‘sick’ in v. 15 is different from the word found in the previous verse. Used only here in the New Testament it means fatigue, deep weariness of spirit, and even despair.

What then, are the lessons concerning prayer? First, we pray in every circumstance. In trouble, pray; when happy, sing. When we are striving or waiting, we pray. When life is routine or filled with new adventure, we are people of prayer. When we need help remembering or long to forget, we call on God to be with us. We make requests, ask for help, declare our gratitude, and sing his praise.

Second, we pray together. We bear each others’ burdens in prayer. We connect with missionaries and friends at a distance as we pray. Love grows as we enter God’s presence with others.

Verses 14 and 15 describe a particular kind of community prayer. There is a simple structure—illness leads to a gathering of church leaders to pray and the result is healing and forgiveness of sins. However, there are details that require close attention because the lessons taught here have been misapplied throughout church history, sometimes with grievous results.

Some of these misapplications include a search for the magic secret that can harness divine power. The phrase “prayer offered in faith” does not describe an incantation that will banish all sickness. This text does not establish a sacrament that requires a priest. James is not marketing olive oil with special consecration “sent to you from the holy land—today only, two for one special.” Finally, these verses are not an invitation to berate a brother in pain for his lack of faith.

Not all physical suffering is the same. As with Paul’s thorn in the flesh, an illness is sometimes sustained to the glory of God. Stephen died of his wounds and honored the Lord (Acts 7:59-60). Tabitha was raised from death and served the Lord (Acts 9:40-41).

So what should we take away from James 5:14-15? First, James is speaking of a serious condition (not a stubbed toe) that is connected to sin which requires forgiveness.

There are two ways sin and sickness might be joined. We know that sinful choices can lead to illness or injury. I once had a car accident because I was so angry at a friend that I became distracted and ran a red light. On the other hand, illness sometimes leads to sin. Living with pain and restriction may cause us to resent others and blame God. Sunk in self pity, we lash out at those around us and turn our backs on the Lord.

Recall that the word for sickness in verse 15 implies a despairing heart, a dark loss of hope that requires the intervening prayers of the church. Elders are called. These can include the recognized leaders of the congregation or, more generally, ‘senior saints,’ men and woman who have lived through trials and can testify to God’s faithfulness. Prayer in this case overcomes despair and hopelessness leading to both forgiveness and healing.

James 5:16-18:

¹⁶Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. ¹⁷Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. ¹⁸Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

In addition to organized occasions of prayer for those who are sick and despairing, this text describes the ongoing, frequent process of one believer confessing sins to a friend who will pray. James commands a life of mutual confession and comforting prayer because we are prone to hide sin rather than bring it into the light. Confession and prayer, are the way to spiritual health among individuals and in the community.

And James goes on to make a stunning observation. Elijah’s experience of shaping history and unleashing divine power through prayer are unsurpassed in the history of God’s people. Yet Elijah is ‘just like us.’ Two believers committed to honest confession and prayer for one another partake of the same climate-altering power we observe in the prophet of old.

James 5:19-20:

¹⁹My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, ²⁰remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

A further step of mutual ministry is in view here—pursuing a lost sheep. Beyond prayer for the sick and confession of sin, are we a community that will seek out a brother or sister who has lost their faith? Of course, anyone who attempts ‘to turn a sinner from his way’ should expect messy circumstances and prepare for rejection.

But even when this ministry fails to win back the wanderer it is an encouragement to the entire congregation. I know if I am caught in a trespass, someone will come after me and the love of my brothers and sisters helps me withstand temptation.

Looking back on the whole we see that James has written a book filled with love and serious purpose. He has offered hope to sufferers and challenge to the self-satisfied. The possibilities and shortcomings of the people of God have not changed in 2000 years. May we heed James instruction, throw off encumbrances, and become a people worthy of our Master.