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James 5:1-11

Patiently Enduring Suffering in Light of Coming Judgment and Salvation

To live as an average citizen of America is to know a level of comfort, luxury, and prosperity that was largely unknown to most people throughout history - even better than many kings. Even compared to most people alive today around the world, most of us would be considered rich in comparison. Just think of the billions of people throughout the world and throughout history without cars, electricity, clean running water, or proper medical care - let alone TVs and smartphones! We've been blessed with incredible amounts of wealth, comfort, luxury, and prosperity. But there are some dangers that come with prosperity. For starters, it can start to make us self-indulgent and greedy for more; it can open us up to the temptations of the rich and wealthy, which Jesus so often warns against. Wealth and prosperity can easily draw our gaze onto earthly treasures and values - and away from eternal treasures and values. Earthly wealth, comfort, and prosperity can dull an eternal perspective down to a purely worldly perspective. And that can be absolutely devastating to our spiritual health, for many reasons. The most obvious one is that it can easily lead to greater sin and idolatry in our hearts and lives. But there's another danger here that we may not think of: the more our hearts are focused on earthly treasures and indulging in physical comfort, the less prepared we are to deal with suffering in our lives.

No matter how rich, powerful, successful or comfortable we become, we will all still suffer. It's inevitable. We live in a sinful, fallen, broken world - and that means, we live in a world full of sorrow and suffering. We all experience it, sooner or later. We all suffer the effects of sin and the brokenness of creation; we experience different kinds of afflictions, different kinds of physical, mental, or emotional anguish; we all get sick, get injured, and eventually all die. We may suffer injustice, oppression, or abuse, being wronged by other people, often by people in authority over us. We might be exploited at work; taken advantage of by businesses, scammers, or greedy insurance agencies; we might suffer injustice in the legal system all because we don't have enough money to afford a better lawyer than the other person who's lying and wronging us; we might suffer the consequences of unjust and immoral laws made by corrupt politicians greedy for more wealth and power. I'm sure we can all relate to being used, abused, or taken advantage of for someone else's selfish gain.

And Christians aren't immune to suffering; in fact, sometimes we experience suffering *precisely because* we're Christians, being persecuted for our faith or experiencing earthly, temporary suffering as a consequence for obeying God. We might like to think that if we just obey God or just have enough faith, then all of our problems will go away and we'll have more comfortable lives and less suffering. But this just isn't the picture the Bible paints for us. Jesus *promises* that if we believe and follow Him, then we will endure suffering just like He did. In **John 15:18**, the night before He suffered and died on the cross, Jesus told His followers, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you... But because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you." We're promised that we will experience suffering as Christians - even suffering for the sake of Christ. And that's not just limited to those who have been beaten or imprisoned or lost their lives for being Christians; it includes being made fun of by friends and family members for your faith; losing relationships or respect from people at work because of decisions you make in your obedience to Christ; or being sued in court because you refuse to acknowledge LGBTQ marriages as legitimate due to your biblical convictions; or any kind of pressure or opposition we might receive from a lost world that's hostile to Christ and those who believe in Him. And if we're paying attention to how things are going in our own culture, then we know that Christians are suffering more and more persecution in our own country every day.

So whether it's persecution or suffering of another kind, we'll all face it. Perhaps you're enduring suffering right now. So the question is: *what do we do about it?* How do we respond to suffering in this life? That's exactly the answer that James answers in our passage this morning: James 5:1-11. It is a call for us to *patiently endure* suffering by looking past our earthly circumstances and fixing our eyes on what is to come: we're called to remember that God's justice and judgment will surely come against the wicked who are causing suffering; we're called to remember that Christ is coming back, that he could return at any moment, and will bring sure salvation when He does; and we're called to patiently endure in faithfulness and righteousness until that day comes.

First, James calls us to patiently endure suffering by reminding us of the certainty of God's judgment coming up the wicked who cause others to suffer.

I. God's Judgment is Surely Coming Upon the Greedy, Oppressive, and Self-Indulgent Wicked (5:1-6)

In this first section of our passage, James is prophetically proclaiming the sure and certain judgment that God is bringing against the wicked rich for their oppression and injustices that commit against others in their greedy pursuit of wealth and self-indulgence. James begins by addressing this proclamation of judgment “to the rich” in verses 1-3: “Come now, you rich, weep and howl, for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have stored up treasure in the last days.” Like one of the Old Testament prophets, James tells them to “weep and mourn” because God’s judgment is coming upon them; in fact, this judgment is so sure and certain that he switches to the present tense in vv.2-3, saying that all their wealth has wasted away and decayed - their clothes eaten by moths, their treasures and money corroded, all their riches and wealth they stored up in this earth rotted and decayed - not because it had already happened yet, but because their fate was so certain that James could speak of it as if it had already happened. But make no mistake: the judgment he’s declaring here is the final judgment. James is declaring to the wealthy and rich that all of the earthly treasure and riches they have stored up for themselves in this life are not going to last; once they die, all of their riches will be gone, wasted away, even gold and silver that doesn’t rust and seems like it would last forever - no matter how secure your finances and treasure may seem on earth, you can’t take it with you into death. But the language here is even stronger than that; he’s not just saying that these riches will decay - their riches actually *testify against* them in judgment; the gold and silver doesn’t just corrode, but it corrodes and eats their flesh as well. Why is that? It’s because all of these treasures they have stored up for themselves “in the last days” will serve as evidence for how wicked and evil they are.

Which brings us to our next question we must ask of the text: who are these “rich” people that James is addressing? Is it all rich people or certain kinds of rich people? James goes on to explain why judgment is coming upon them, and these reasons make it very clear that he’s not talking to all rich people in general, but specifically to the *wicked* rich; the issue is not having money or wealth per se, but how their wealth reflects their evil hearts and is used for evil purposes. We see this in verses 4-6: “Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have

reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous person. He does not resist you.” These people aren’t just rich: their wicked and oppressive. In their greed, they exploit their workers and don’t pay them the wages they deserved, committing a grievous injustice - after all, if you’re a day laborer, and you live paycheck to paycheck, and you depend on your paycheck *daily*, then if you work and don’t get paid, you don’t eat. These rich exploited and oppressed out of greed and “self-indulgence,” fattening themselves at the expense of others. And that last verse is particularly insightful: they “condemn and murder the righteous person” - that is, not just the poor in general, but poor *believers*; these people are persecuting Christians. The only people who are righteous are righteous by grace through faith in Christ alone. None of us are righteous because of how good we are or how little we sin; and no one is righteous because of how poor or oppressed or victimized they are either. No, we’ve all sinned - we all deserve the judgment of Hell that is promised for the wicked here. Our only hope of righteousness and salvation from Hell is being declared righteous by God’s grace, which He gives to all who trust in Christ, who lived a righteous life for us, died on the cross for our sins, and rose again.

So that brings us to another crucial question: are these people James is addressing Christians or unbelievers? Are they part of the church or outside of it? From what James here, it seems pretty clear that these wicked rich are not Christians; they are the rich and powerful elites and wealthy landowners oppressing and persecuting the Christians, most of whom were poor and part of the lower social class in that time period. Furthermore, James doesn't call them to repent, but instead tells them that they are on their way to Hell. I think the clear point is that these people are not Christians, but those oppressing people and persecuting Christians. But some commentators challenge this, because if these rich people aren’t Christians, then why does James address them here, in a letter to Christian churches? Why address people that aren’t going to hear what you’re saying? I think James does this for two reasons: First, to encourage believers who are suffering injustice and persecution; I think that’s the primary purpose of this passage, which we’ll come back to in a bit. But the second reason is so that James’s Christian audience - including us, even including richer and wealthy Christians - might be warned about God’s coming judgment against these sins as well.

Jesus warned us, in Matt. 6, against storing up treasures on earth, saying we should instead store up treasures in Heaven. So I think we are meant to see here in James a similar warning against wickedly amassing earthly treasures, often at the expense of others, driven by greed and self-indulgence. And even if you don't consider yourself rich or wealthy, it's all too possible to relate to the motivations of greed and self-indulgence in our hearts, even if we're poor, isn't it? This is a stark warning for us to repent and crush any greed or self-indulgence in our hearts. So we need to ask ourselves: Do we have a spirit of generosity and care for others, so that we're willing to receive less and give more for the benefit of others? Or do we have a spirit of greed and self-indulgence? Is our relationship to money and stuff characterized by contentment in Christ? Or dissatisfaction, a constant desire for more and more? If someone looked at your budget, spending receipts, and the way you use our time and resources, what kind of treasure would they say you're seeking: earthly treasure that will rot and waste away? Or the treasure of the kingdom of heaven that will last forever?

This has some practical applications for us. We shouldn't cheat someone in business deals or rip someone off to make more money. If you are a salesperson, lawyer, contractor, or any vocation where your work involves you selling a product or service to clients or customers, you shouldn't lie or rip the person off or try to knowingly trick them just to make yourself richer. If you are a boss, you shouldn't oppress your employees - giving them terrible, unsafe work conditions, giving them reasonable expectations, asking them to do immoral or illegal things, not paying them an appropriate amount, or even stealing from their wages - all so that you can make a larger profit or have a more comfortable life. You should care for your employees, making sure they are treated well and receive fair wages, knowing that you will give an account before the Lord for how you treat them. If you are a landlord, then you shouldn't be a slumlord - you shouldn't force your tenants to live in unsafe conditions, neglect to make necessary repairs, or try to skate by on legal regulations just to save a buck and make more of a profit. You should be considerate of your tenants, for they, too, are made in the image of God and loved by Him, and you'll give an account for whether or not you were a just or oppressive landlord. No, it's not wrong to require them to pay rent - if they don't, then they are the ones committing an injustice. But you should still give a Christlike, Christian witness in the way you treat them. When we're voting for laws and political policies, we shouldn't just vote for things that would benefit us personally - as Christians, we're commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves, and that means,

we must strive to vote for individuals and policies that promote the good and justice of all. In whatever contexts we find ourselves, we must not wrong or oppress others or commit injustices in order to make ourselves richer, better off, or more comfortable. We must repent of just selfish, greedy self-indulgence - for it is nothing less than idolatry.

But that said, I actually think the *primary* purpose of this passage is to be an encouragement to believers who are suffering. After all, the verse that follows this section, verse 7, says, “Be patient, *therefore*, brothers...” Whenever we see the word “therefore” in the Bible, we also have to pause and ask, “What’s that ‘therefore’ there for?” Here, it shows us that James is commanding us to be patient *because of* what he’s just told us in verses 1-6: that is, that judgment will certainly fall upon the wicked. So why is this a reason for us to be encouraged and to patiently endure suffering? James’s point here is to *encourage* us to patiently endure suffering injustice and oppression by remembering that the wicked will be brought to justice by “the Lord of Hosts,” for “the cries” of those suffering have reached His ears. It can be so discouraging to look around this fallen world and see the wicked prospering and getting away with their evil deeds. They lie, cheat, steal, murder, and rob - and then get away with it, getting richer and more powerful. This makes us burn with indignation and ask, “Is there no justice?” But the Bible tells us: don’t worry, justice will be done. Justice may not come in this life, but this life is coming to an end, and the Lord will personally see to it that every wrong is righted, that every evil deed is punished, that justice is done. As Martin Luther King, Jr. famously said, “The ark of history is long, but it bends towards justice.” If you are suffering oppression, injustice, or persecution, then rest assured: justice will be done and every wrong will be righted eventually; God will judge the oppressors and bring salvation and eternal relief. Which encourages us to look forward to the hope we have in the return of Jesus Christ, bringing us to point number two...

II. Patiently Endure Suffering by Remembering that Christ’s Return is Certain and Imminent (5:7-8)

In light of the certainty of God’s coming judgment against the wicked, we’re called to endure suffering with *patience*, by looking forward to the coming of Christ as our sure hope of final salvation and deliverance from suffering. We see this in vv.7-8: “Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.” After addressing the non-Christian,

wicked rich, James now turns to address Christians - calling them “brothers,” or “brothers and sisters.” And he exhorts them to be *patient* in light of God’s coming judgment against the wicked who bring oppression, injustice, and persecution; he calls us to *patiently endure* suffering, waiting patiently “until the coming of the Lord.” This clearly refers to the Second Coming of Christ. Jesus Christ, the God-Man, has already come once, being born of a baby, living a perfectly righteous life in His ministry, dying on the cross as a substitutionary sacrifice for sins, and rising from the grave on the third day, before ascending back to heaven. But that’s not the end of the story: He promised that He’s *coming back for us*, His redeemed people, who believe in Him and are forgiven of our sins; He’s coming back for His beloved bride, His body, His Church. And it’s precisely when Jesus returns that He will usher in full, complete salvation, once and for all! When the clouds are rolled back like a scroll, and Christ comes riding on the clouds in glory, He will usher in both judgment and salvation - for we cannot have true salvation without there being true, everlasting judgment on all that is wicked. But when Christ returns, and the dead are raised to stand before Him in judgment, He will put away all the wicked, so that they can no longer cause harm, abuse, injustice, oppression, persecution, or any evil to any of us again! Christ will destroy all of our enemies - even Sin, Satan, and Death!

And on that day of Judgment, when we stand before the Holy God, we too will be judged, and we will know full well just how sinful and wretched we are - just how much we, too, deserve to be cast into the eternal fires of Hell. If you don’t think you deserve Hell, then you should greatly fear that day and think again, for it shows just how much danger your soul is in. But if you’re resting in Christ through faith, if you’re trusting not in your own righteousness but in the righteousness of Christ given as a free gift of grace to you, then you can rest assured: on that day, as you stand in judgment, God will declare you, “Not guilty, forgiven, and righteous!” You will not receive the punishment you deserve, but we will be raised to eternal life in Christ! When Christ returns, that day of judgment will be a day of glorious salvation for us! He will usher in the New Heavens and the New Earth, where there is no more sin, no more sorrow or pain, no more suffering whatsoever, no more evil, injustice, wickedness, or oppression - no more death! That is the glorious, sure hope we have to look forward to in Christ!

So when you’re enduring suffering in this life, we are to respond by *patiently waiting and looking forward to Christ’s return*. In fact, we should do so believing that His return is *immanent*. As v.8 says, “Be patient. Establish your hearts for the Lord *is at hand*.” This means the Lord’s

return is *near* - it's close by; it could happen at any minute! This should encourage us in the midst of suffering and lead us to cry, "Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly!" But we're forced to ask: if James wrote this 2,000 years ago, and Jesus still hasn't returned, then how can he say that the Lord is at hand? This is because, while we don't know when Jesus will return, we do know that He could very well return at any moment - even tonight or tomorrow. This was just as true in James's day as it is in ours. This is why, in v.3, he referred to their time period as "the latter days" or "the last days." Just like James and the early church, we, too, are in the "last days," and have been ever since Christ went back to Heaven. Ever since then, we've lived on the precipice of eternity, on the very edge of the end of all things. We live in the overlap of the ages; Christ ushered in the Kingdom of Heaven - it has begun! - but the Kingdom of Darkness, though defeated, has not fully ended; it's still letting out its final, gasping breaths. So in these last days, we hold our breath and wait with eager hope and anticipation because *Jesus really can come back at any moment, just like that!* And yet, we also know that this has been true for over 2,000 years now. Christ hasn't returned yet, and we don't know when He will; He may come tomorrow, He may come another 2,000 years from now. But we *do know* with absolute certainty that's He's coming again!

Therefore, like a farmer waiting for the rain to come and water his crops, so we must wait patiently for the Lord to come. We must be *patient*. But this is not passive waiting; it's active. We must not lose heart, we must not despair in the face of difficult, suffering, or even persecution. We must look to Christ and believe that He is surely coming, and could at any minute. And this is exactly what equips us to persevere, to patiently endure, for the long haul, for the rest of our lives, should the Lord tarry.

Therefore, we're called to patiently endure suffering by not turning away from the faith into sin, but by instead patiently walking in faithfulness and righteousness. Which brings us to our final point...

III. Patiently Endure Suffering by being Steadfast in Faithfulness and Righteousness (5:9-11)

As we experience suffering in life, it's an opportunity for us to trust the Lord as He uses it for our own spiritual growth and maturity - just as James reminded us at the beginning of the book, in 1:2-4, where we're called to count all trials as joy. But as we experience suffering, it's also often a time of temptation for us, isn't it? As we experience greater stress, pressure, sorrow,

or pain, we're often tempted to snap, to give up or to give in to sin. Therefore, James also reminds us that patiently enduring suffering means striving to persevere in faithfulness and righteousness. I think this is part of what James is getting at in v.8, when he says, "establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand." And one particular way we're often tempted to sin while enduring suffering is by sinning with our words against each other. So it makes perfect sense that James makes this application in v.9: "Do not grumble against one another, brothers."

When the pressure of suffering comes, we can grow incredibly agitated, frustrated, or despairing; and in those moments of weakness and vulnerability, we're very prone to snap and lash out, to grumble and complain or speak wrongly against each other - even when we're partaking in the same sufferings! It's like when you set off on a family road trip. At first you're all excited, but after you've been in the car for 20 hours straight, and the air conditioner is broken and it's 100 degrees outside, and you've run out of entertainment hours ago - yes, you're all enduring the same trial together - but you're also probably all starting to get pretty cranky and annoyed with each other. And so it is with us as believers. As a church, we've all linked arms with each other, committed to helping each other persevere in the faith all the way until Christ returns or calls us home, no matter what suffering or circumstances might come along the way. We're all in the same car together, on the same road trip. But Christ promises we will endure suffering while on this road trip through life together. And we're gonna be tempted to snap and get cranky and grumble and take out our frustration on one another. But instead, Christ calls us to *endure patiently* - even with one another. We're to patiently endure by not giving into temptation, but persevering in righteousness, by His grace.

And just in case we think this is optional, James tells us pretty good motivation in the rest of v.9: "so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door." We must live as though we really do believe what we say we believe: that Jesus really is coming back, that He could at any moment, and that when He does, or when we die, we will stand before Him in judgment. This should strike the fear of God in us, leading us to repent from sin, avoid and fight temptation, and pursue righteousness and faithfulness with our whole lives - especially in our speech and tempers with one another. We're warned here against the *opposite* of patient endurance: that is, falling away from faith, turning away from Christ and embracing a life of sin instead. If you're tempted to give up and walk away when the going gets tough, be warned lest you, too, be judged: the Lord is standing at the door, and our only hope on that day is to be saved

in Christ through faith. Therefore, let us pursue righteousness and steadfastness, for it will be vindicating evidence of our faith in Christ on the day of judgment. Let us follow the examples we have of the Old Testament Prophets; as v.11 says, “Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.” The Prophets of Old endured great suffering and persecution on account of their faith and obedience to the Lord - yet they remained faithful, even unto death. And Job is held up as the premier example of patiently enduring suffer: he lost everything - his health, wealth, family, home, respect - yet in all his mighty suffering, he did not turn away from the Lord. He remained faithful. Yes, he blundered and the Lord corrected Him - but even this was the Lord’s mercy in sustaining and preserving Job. And so it reminds us of the Lord’s mercy and compassion for us, in the midst of our suffering.

Friend, whatever suffering you may be enduring; whatever trials may lie before you; whatever may come your way - even persecution, nakedness, famine, or sword - know that *nothing* can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Our Father is full of compassion and mercy to us, even in the midst of our sin and suffering. We can hope to be steadfast in suffering because of *His* steadfast love for us! So press on, brothers and sisters; whatever suffering you’re enduring or will endure, be patient, brothers and sisters, until the Lord returns, for He will right all wrongs, dry every tear, banish all darkness, and turn all mourning into joy! He will bring true justice. He will bring true salvation from sin, sorrow, and suffering, once and for all! So let us press on and persevere in the faith, because our only hope - our *sure and certain hope* - is that on that day, when we stand before the Lord, we will be clothed in the very righteousness of Christ Jesus our Lord, raised to eternal life and salvation, purely by His grace and the blood of His cross! So let us press on, brothers and sisters, that we might hear, “Well done, my good and faithful servant.” Let us endure for the joy that is set before us.

And if you’re not a believer, I pray that you would heed the warning, for Christ is coming back; the judge is standing at the door. But now is the time of mercy; cry out to the Lord, for He is compassionate and merciful! Trust in Christ alone for salvation, and you, too, will be saved. If you have any questions about this, please come and speak with me after the service. Let us pray.