

## Wisdom and Warnings: The Book of James

### Patience in Suffering

James 5:7-8

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*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 the late rains. You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand (James 5:7–8).*

Scroll through social media or your favorite online video platform, and you'll find video footage designed to make you laugh, cry, or be shocked.

How many times have you gathered some friends around a phone and said, "You've got to see this." Whether it's a deaf baby hearing the sound of her mom's voice after a procedure, a bulldog that rides a skateboard on a sunny boardwalk, a gender-reveal mishap that makes you cringe, or a bridal party dance routine, the videos offer us a promise: watch and be delighted.

And what's the typical teaser to keep you engaged? "Wait for it."

The statement is both instructive and cautionary. "Wait for it" informs us that there's something worthwhile that's coming. Think of the last video you started to watch only to be bored. Your attention starts to fade. Your curiosity decreases. Consider the awkward moment when your friends are gathered around to watch the video you promised would be hilarious, but it's longer than what you remember. Sensing the social restlessness, you might say: "Wait a second. . .it's coming." The instruction to wait tells us that something is amazing at the end.

"Wait for it" is also cautionary. We're conditioned for quick responses. We might draw the wrong conclusion that a video isn't worth watching to the end, only to miss a memorable moment. Who hasn't walked away from a group too soon, heard the eruption of laughter, and returned quickly to say, "What happened? What's so funny? Sorry, I missed it." You didn't wait for it.

Somewhere in your mind, you determined that another fifteen seconds was just too much to give. You walked away, determining that the wait wasn't worth it.

We have a natural, negative perspective on waiting. Consider how you feel about a "waiting line" at the Department of Motor Vehicles, a website that doesn't load quickly, being placed on hold with that annoying music, or learning that your Amazon package is delayed—by a day!

We just don't like to wait.

However, think about how much of our life involves waiting. Stoplights, traffic jams, pregnancy, call-backs for a play, posting of grades, a meaningful relationship, a job offer, medical tests, a call from a wayward child, etc. Waiting is hard-wired into our humanity. Every day that we live, we will find some opportunity to wait.

Waiting, however, is not just a part of our humanity; it's also a vital part of Christianity. But not in the same way. In the Bible, waiting is commended and commanded. Like so many other things—like suffering and the crucifixion—God aims to transform our waiting. That's why the Old and New Testaments talk about waiting so often. That's also why believers are commanded to wait. From God's perspective, waiting is good.

The Bible identifies seasons of waiting as something helpful—even spiritual. Patience is productive. Endurance is a calling. But that's not how we naturally think, is it?

It's easy to think waiting is a waste.

Once again James helps us. Throughout this book, he instructs us to go the opposite direction of both the world's system and our natural inclination. He's cautioned us about using the “dark arts” to get what we want (4:1-4). To not let anger get win the day (1:20). To be slow to speak and quick to listen (1:19). To not speak in a way that negates God's sovereignty (4:13-16).

In 5:7-8, James returns to the theme of spiritual endurance. Remember, this is how he began the book:

*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2–4).*

Our text today serves as a bookend for this important theme of patience, waiting, and endurance.

### **Three Truths to Remember When Life Is Hard**

Verses 7-8 highlight three important truths for us to consider when life and spiritual faithfulness is difficult. You may find yourself in a season where you're battling believing that your season of waiting is not a waste. You may have a friend who's walking through a difficult time, and God has called you to help him or her. Or it may be that this sermon will serve to prepare you for a season that is coming.

The Christian life involves many seasons of waiting. So, it's good to have basic truths in our minds and hearts.

#### **1. Waiting Is Commanded**

The first truth to notice here is rather simple but it's really important. James issues a command about the importance of patience. He says:

*Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord (James 5:7a).*

The fact that he says “therefore” means that he is connecting this verse to the previous ones about the danger of riches. In particular, James’s readers were more likely to be on the receiving end of unfair treatment than being wealthy. They were likely facing hardship in a situation that seemed hopeless.

Because he says, “brothers,” it’s clear that he’s writing to fellow Christians who are struggling to find their way forward in a hard and challenging world. We’ll talk about this more later, but it’s worth noting the importance of how this teaching plays out in community. In verse 9 (next week’s message), he cautions them about grumbling against each other. The community of faith should not allow the pressure of hardship to create internal, verbal combat.

When we convince ourselves that waiting is a waste, it’s easy to justify all kinds of sinful responses. Just think of all the times that you’ve said, “I’m frustrated, I’m scared, This is unfair, I’m sick of this, I want my life back, or it’s hopeless.” One of the ways this text can be extremely helpful is to remind you that there are alternatives to being sinful. As I’ve said before: Your only option is never only to sin.

But it’s easy to do when you’ve convinced yourself that patience, endurance, and waiting are a waste.

What’s the alternative? It’s to realize that James issues a command here. He says, “Be patient.” Just two words, but they are incredibly important. And notice how often the word is repeated – three times in just two verses. It is also used in verse 10. Let’s start with the meaning.

The word in the original language has the idea of being long-suffering. I think those two words help us understand patience or seasons of spiritual waiting. To suffer means that you are experiencing something hard. And there would be a natural and normal tendency to have an acceptable duration in mind. No one expects life to be easy. But patience or long-suffering means that you’ve reset your expectations or the requirements for the extent of the suffering.

To be patient is to respond in a way that is not normal or typical based upon other people or our expectations.

In other words, patience is tied to more than circumstances. It’s connected to our perception of the value of hard circumstances.

Allow me to illustrate this. When you’re making cookies, you know that there’s a necessary part of the process that involves patience. The cookies have to bake. For the cookies to taste good, the ingredients have to be combined with a heated environment. So, when you are making cookies you plan on baking them. A child may not understand this, so she might complain. “Why are they taking so long?” And you’d probably say, “Be patient, honey.” But you might complain if your oven only heats to 150 degrees and it takes three hours to bake the cookies. You might say, “We have to get this oven fixed, this is ridiculous.”

Patience and perspective are linked together. And that’s the problem, isn’t it?

Our patience runs out based upon the limitations of our perspective. And that’s why James says, “until the coming of the Lord.” This is a statement not only about the future but about what Christians believe.

It's a theological statement about where everything in life is headed. It's a statement about a coming victory. It's a statement about how Jesus is going to make everything right.

And that's why patience can be commanded. It looks beyond our perspective and our expectations. Waiting humbly acknowledges my inability to control everything, and it stakes its claim in our hope in God.<sup>1</sup> Patience surfaces two questions: "Who am I?" and "What do I want?"

Ben Patterson summarizes this well when he writes: "Waiting is not just the thing we have to do until we get what we hope for. Waiting is part of the process of becoming what we hope for."<sup>2</sup>

In this way, waiting and patience is an active way that expresses obedience to God. Patience isn't the last resort. Waiting aims my need to be in control, to take revenge, to become bitter.

Patience is an act of war against my self-sufficiency. And that's why it's commanded.

## 2. Waiting Is Common

The second truth to remember when waiting is hard is simply that waiting or patience is common. In other words, part of the challenge with seasons of waiting is that we see them as unusual. What if we could come to not only embrace but expect waiting. What if we could see waiting as normal and typical? What if we could see waiting as an opportunity?

In verse seven, James turns his reader's attention to an illustration with farming. This must have been something that they would have understood. I'm sure it makes sense to you as well.

*See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains (James 5:7).*

To be a farmer is to learn to wait. When planting, growing, and harvesting crops there is so much that is out of your control. There are some things that you can and must do. The field needs to be prepared. Seeds need to be planted. But then a natural process has to work. A farmer must know that this is part of what it means to be a farmer. Kurt Richardson says, that the farmer "must labor without knowing what the weather will bring or the degree of abundance of crops."<sup>3</sup>

The text says as much. James invites us to consider this example ("see") to learn how the farmer waits from the precious fruit of the earth. Think about that for a moment. Is anything happening while the farmer waits? Yes! The seed is germinating. The sprouts are growing under the earth. The farmer is powerless to make the seed grow, but his waiting and patience do not create inactivity. While he waits, the created order works.

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<sup>1</sup> Ben Patterson, *Waiting: Finding Hope When God Seems Silent*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 1989), 12.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Kurt A. Richardson, *James*, vol. 36, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 219.

It reminds me of Isaiah 64:4 - *“From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him”* (Isa. 64:4),

The farmer is dependent upon the early and late rains. The early rains begin the germination process. The late rains make the grain strong for harvest.<sup>4</sup> But the farmer cannot control either. Waiting is an essential part of his job description. If the farmer doesn't embrace waiting, he should find a new profession.

James's point is simply that if the farmer lives that way, should Christian live like that as well? It should surprise us at how much waiting surprises and frustrates us. Waiting is not just a part of the created order with farming, consider how much of the Bible involves waiting.

- God designed every day to include a morning and evening, and he ordained sleep as part of the created order (Gen. 1)
- Noah waits inside the ark as the waters subside in the flood (Gen. 8:10-12)
- Abraham and Sarah wait for years for the promised son (Gen. 15-16)
- Moses waits for forty years before receiving the burning bush calling (Ex. 7)
- The deliverance through the Red Sea required waiting on the Lord to act (Ex. 14:13)
- The giving of the 10 commandments involved waiting for forty days (Ex. 24:12) and the failure with the golden calf happened because of a failure to wait (Ex. 32)
- Saul was disqualified as king because he failed to wait for Samuel (1 Sam. 10-13)
- Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness before the launch of his ministry (Matt. 4)

I could give you many more. And if you think about it—even redemption itself involves waiting. The resurrection happens three days after the crucifixion. And even now we are patiently waiting for Christ's return.

*Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace* (2 Pet. 3:11–14).

Do you see how much waiting and patience are built into both the created order and the plan of God? Patiently waiting is so common in the Bible that we ought to be surprised when waiting isn't a major part of the equation. Yet everything in our culture goes the opposite direction. Claudia Peppel in *Why We Hate to Wait*, writes:

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<sup>4</sup> Kurt A. Richardson, [James](#), vol. 36, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 219.

*Waiting, according to the collective experience in Western culture, is considered an imposition. Anyone who has to wait for a delayed train or plane, an appointment, or a free table in a restaurant, "becomes impatient, often angry and aggressive," writes Cologne-based author André Bosse. "Apparently, it doesn't work to see waiting as a gift of time," Bosse analyzes. "Instead of enjoying it, it becomes torture."<sup>5</sup>*

But what if Christians could see waiting differently? What if we saw it as commanded and common?

### **3. Waiting Is Courageous**

Rather than seeing patience and waiting as the last resort, James calls us to embrace patience and to “establish your hearts.”

Now, the reason he says to do this is that “the coming of the Lord is at hand.” Once again, James points to a theological commitment or a belief system. He’s reminding them that the Lord’s return is going to happen. Victory is assured. Jesus will make everything right. In other words, James is calling Christians to live with a longer-range view of their present circumstances.

This kind of waiting refuses to live as if Jesus is dead. It courageously pushes against the natural tendency to only focus on what we can see and what we perceive. This kind of waiting stakes its claim in the future, not in present.

If embracing patience as a command requires obedience, and if understanding that waiting is common necessitates wisdom, seeing waiting as courageous takes faith.

Waiting means that I’m not in control. Patience means that I feel tension, disappointment, frustration, or fear. And yet to “establish your heart” means that I return to and rehearse what I believe. And often it involves other people reminding you what you believe. Throughout the Bible, people were sent to strengthen other believers as they waited through trials and difficult times (1 Thess. 3:2).

But the Bible also tells us that God strengthens us as we wait for him.

*And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen (1 Pet. 5:10–11).*

Often the most courageous thing that you can do is to wait patiently.

*I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living! Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD! (Ps. 27:13–14)*

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/why-we-hate-to-wait/a-53697807>

*Love the LORD, all you his saints! The LORD preserves the faithful but abundantly repays the one who acts in pride. Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the LORD! (Ps. 31:23–24)*

*I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD. Blessed is the man who makes the LORD his trust (Ps. 40:1–4).*

Do you see it? Waiting is not a waste! Patience is not pointless. It is commanded, it is common, and it is courageous.

So, wait for it.

Wait for him!

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