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Faith Brought to Life Waiting/Suffering

By Matthew Hook

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James 5:7-13

7 Be 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.

8 You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.

9 Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

10 Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

11 As 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.

12 Above 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.

13 Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.

Patience: The farmer, The prophets, Job

The woman writes: "I dated him for nine years to be certain when I married him. I married the first time when I was young and very stupid, and I did not want to make the same mistake twice. But after our marriage of only four years, my husband was killed in an accident. The last two words we said to one another were 'I love you.'"

Then she goes on to say "I have had such a problem dealing with this. You should know that my dad died a few years ago, my brother was killed the next year and my mother died forty days after my brother. My step-dad died a couple years later. Between then and now, I have lost 5 uncles and 2 aunts...So, do you see why I feel so alone most of the time? I suffer so much!"

I think of Betty Le Brake. Since she was a young married woman, she has suffered severe arthritis, to the point where she is now wheel chair bound, unable to do things for herself. Her one son, while gifted, unable socially to hold down a job. But she was at church every Sunday. She managed to sign her name on each Christmas card to us, though her hands were so disfigured she could hardly hold a pen. She always had a smile, and a kind word.

I have to admit I don't understand the pain and suffering that are a part of the world. The dreamer in me wants a world where nobody gets hurt. The realist in me knows to live is to suffer in some measure. At least some of the time, pain has its way with us – pinning us down, tearing at us, and bruising our hearts.

Today's message is more like "real life brought to faith." James knew this. They say the job of the preacher is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. I think James, one of the writers of the New Testament, understood that. He's been afflicting us plenty these last several weeks as we've studied his letter. He's confronted us, but hasn't provided much comfort.

But now he brings us back to the theme he started out in: "*Count it all joy when you face various trials...*" He walks us through the heat of suffering and trauma that often invade our lives. He shows us how our faith is brought to our life by not fighting back with a revengeful spirit at those who bring pain into our lives. He talks about patience with people who go against us. He also pleads for endurance through the really tough times of life that leave us with no answers. He wants us to "*be an example in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.*" (5:10).

First, a word about suffering. James points to the Old Testament prophets of God, who spoke for God. They were marked by suffering in their lives. Listen to the list from Hebrews 11 "*Well, how much more do I need to say? It would take too long to recount the stories of faith of...all the prophets. (Some) trusted God and were tortured. Some were mocked and their backs were cut open with whips. Others were chained in dungeons. Some died by stoning, and some were sawed in half; others were killed with the sword. Some went about in skins of sheep and goats hungry, oppressed, and mistreated. They wandered over deserts and mountains, hiding in caves and holes in the ground.*" (Hebrews 11:32, 35-38).

James reminds us that entering a life of faith, following Jesus, and worshiping God doesn't exempt us from suffering. Christians get cancer in the same proportion as non-Christians. Believers are involved in as many auto accidents as non-believers. We lose our jobs, see our spouses walk out on us and stumble over "suffering" as frequently as people who don't know Christ. I wish there was an "edge" that we got when we bring our faith to life, but the Bible doesn't advertise that. Suffering in the Bible is very real. There's no sense that it is something you get over fast or easily. The early Christians understood that suffering was part of the deal.

Second, a word about patience. "*Be patient, 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. You, too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.*" (5:7-8).

The word James uses for patience is "long-tempered." Literally it comes from two words that mean "a long way from anger." Now here's the tough part: while suffering implies circumstances we have no control over, patience implies the trouble that comes to us because somebody else sends it our way. "Patience" talks about the pain and suffering that people bring into our lives. James' idea is that when it happens, we don't take revenge, or get even. Part of the problem is when people dump pain into our lives, a lot of us struggle with anger.

We believe the only way for justice is to get back at him and make her feel as much pain as she inflicted on us. We want our enemy to suffer. And that's justice. And we think it's the only way. Except when we do get revenge we're still angry and in pain. But we can never even the score.

Third, a word about grumbling. "*Don't grumble against each other, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door.*" Grumbling is the inner frustration and bitterness that ferments inside us when we can't see the end in sight of what we're going through. When we let this percolate inside us, we build up inward pressure until it explodes and we blame our problems on those who are not to blame.

Fourth, a word about swearing. "Above 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." (5:12) "*Don't swear.*"

And here James quotes his brother, Jesus: “Let your ‘Yes’ be yes and your ‘No’ no.” Say what you mean and mean what you say. Again, the reason should be obvious. When you have to swear that what you are about to say is true, you are implying that you expect others to take your everyday speech less seriously than what you are about to say right now. You are also implying that the only time you can be absolutely trusted to speak the truth is when you have sworn to tell the truth.

James says that Christians, above all, should be able to be counted on to say precisely what they mean and mean exactly what they say. Jesus put the matter this way. He said: “You will be held accountable for every careless word you utter.” In a world full to overload with anxiety caused by meaningless words and half-truths, Christians, above all, have the remarkable ministry of providing havens of reliability and integrity in what they say.

But you know, don’t you, in your heart of hearts that there *is* a better way to respond, don’t you?

Most of our problems come because we just want it to go away – the pressure, the never-ending pain. Sometimes, God in his grace does that – He takes it away. But when he doesn’t, we need to look to James to show us how to respond. James writes “*As 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.*”

Perseverance is patience-stretched-out. It was the same word used for a pack animal with its master’s supplies. So by definition, perseverance doesn’t happen without the load. Perseverance is the attitude that doesn’t break easily under suffering. It means hanging in there when you’d like to run away. It’s the same thing as faith – if you feel God with you all the time, you have no need of faith. And James reminds the Christians of Job’s real life example. He lost everything. He cried out, he wept, he protested, he questioned, but he never lost his faith in God, which is why he persevered.

But James gives us a clue – when he writes “*You... have seen what the Lord finally brought about.*” Now I wouldn’t have picked “finally”. I’d have gone with “quickly” or “immediately”. I think I have a low pain tolerance. I’d rather get it over with (if I can’t avoid it). But the word “finally” reminds me that God’s timing is not my timing. And if that’s you today, remember: The Lord is rarely early, but he’s never late. He’s always right on time. (horizontal/vertical perspectives). From God’s perspective, there is the heart of the Father who loves you and who is sending his Son Jesus to gather you to his side in heaven forever. Think of it this way: **no matter what you are feeling, there’s a place in God’s heart that only you can fill.**