**BE PATIENT AND PRAY**

December 9, 2012

James 5:1-20

Key Verse 5:8 “You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near.”

Have you enjoyed James Bible study? I think this book has been very powerful in giving us practical life direction but also very challenging in many ways. James told us to persevere through our trials rather than making excuses. He challenged us to prove our faith as genuine through our deeds. He instructed us to tame our tongues and to submit ourselves to God. None of these things are easy. But through them we can see God’s hope for each of us to grow as spiritually mature servants. In this final chapter, James encourages us to have patience in sufferings by holding on to our firm hope in Jesus’ Second Coming. He also teaches us how to effectively pray for one another so that we can receive God’s healing and forgiveness. I pray that the Holy Spirit may work in each of our hearts at this time to help us hold on to one word of God.

I. Patience in suffering (1-12)

James begins the last chapter of his epistle with a strong and sudden warning against rich oppressors: “Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you” (1). This warning is most likely directed against wealthy non-Christians who were greatly opposing the Christians living scattered among the nations. From chapter 2, we recall how James accused the rich of exploiting Christians, dragging them into the courts and slandering the noble name of Jesus. Now he accuses them of being greedy, dishonest and for condemning and murdering innocent men. Because the early Christians were such a small and poor group, they were powerless to stand up against such strong adversaries.

But James offered his brothers and sisters hope. He promised that their cries had reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. He promised that God was planning to put an end to the oppressive rule of their enemies. But, that day wouldn’t come until Jesus’ Second Coming. So, they had to be patient.

Look at verses 7-8. “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. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near.” Here James uses the analogy of a farmer to explain the kind of patient attitude that Christians should have as they wait for the kingdom of God. A farmer wakes up at the crack of dawn to begin his work. He must work hard to sow his seeds, water them and keep the fields clear of weeds and pests. For a long time, he does not see any reward for all his hard work. But he waits patiently for the autumn and spring rains. Sometimes the rains come early; other times they seem to take forever. But the farmer doesn’t give in to fear. He keeps on working, watching and waiting with the image of that delicious watermelon in his mind. And when the day of harvest finally comes, he is so happy. As he bites into that juicy piece of watermelon, he realizes that it was all worth the wait.

What can we learn from all of this? As Christians, we can wake up early to pray for God’s kingdom to come on earth. We can sow the word of God in students’ hearts and help them to grow in God’s image. This work is long and hard, and sometimes we want to give up. But we wait patiently for God’s blessings like the autumn and spring rains. These rains are the fulfillment of God’s promises and the work of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes they come to us powerfully like a thunderstorm. Other times we must endure long periods of spiritual dryness. But God’s kingdom grows by his sovereignty and power. Eventually, he sends his blessings in his best time. Then, one day, our hope in Jesus’ Second Coming will be realized! We will finally see him face to face and will hear him say, “Well done, good and faithful servant!” before giving us an eternal inheritance in the kingdom of God. This is our real and lasting hope. James reminds us “the Lord’s coming is near.” It is closer than ever before. It is closer than we think.

But just as many large fields cannot be harvested by a single farmer, it takes many men and women working together to accomplish God’s kingdom work. This is why James instructs us in verse 9, “Don’t grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!” Grumbling is the opposite of patience. Grumblers get tired of a lack of results and start to blame their co-workers. “Hey, you’re not working hard enough! You call that sowing? At this rate, we’ll starve to death!” But we have no right to judge one another. We must remember that the true Judge, Jesus Christ, is standing at the door. What would Jesus say if he saw us grumbling and pointing fingers at one another upon his return? We must remember that we are all in this together. We must put an end to our selfish grumbling and work hard at the job God has given each of us to do with thankful hearts.

To give us a biblical example of how to be patient in the face of suffering, James reminds us of Job. “You have heard of Job’s perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about” (11b). What can Job’s life teach us about perseverance? Job was an upright and blameless man, and God blessed him with a large family and an abundance of livestock, servants and wealth. But suddenly, all of these things were taken away from him in a single day. He was also inflicted with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. His own wife even came to him and said, “Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!” How could anyone respond to such things other than bitter complaining and cursing? But the word of God says concerning Job, “Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.’” (Job 1:20b-21). Wow! Job actually worshiped God in this situation! What amazing faith it took for him to hold on to God’s goodness in such dark circumstances.

Job’s story reminded the suffering Christians of a simple truth: “the Lord is full of compassion and mercy” (11b). So, they could endure all of their troubles by holding on to God’s goodness and love. Romans 8:28 says, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” For God’s people, nothing happens by accident. Though God disciplines us, he loves us and will never forsake us. Through our most difficult struggles, he is training us to keep our eyes focused on him. Just as Job’s reward was to see God, we can also meet God personally and grow in his image through our sincere spiritual struggle. We will be sanctified and purified from our sins and made like gold, even now. Then, one day, we will finally see our Lord Jesus in all his glory when he comes again. Our hopes will be fully realized when we are given the glorious resurrection body and reign with him forever. I pray that all of us may work hard and patiently endure all kinds of sufferings in this life by holding on to this one sure hope.

II. The prayer of faith (13-20)

In the last section of this epistle, James turns our attention to the necessity and power of prayer. He starts by saying, “Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise” (13). This shows us that it is not just in our times of weakness that we should seek God, but also in times of blessing. A spiritually mature Christian wants to be in constant fellowship with God and is sensitive to all of God’s gifts as well as his discipline.

But here James especially focuses our attention on how to pray in times of sickness. Look at verses 14-16. “Is 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. And 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. Therefore 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.” Here we can think of the term “sick” to mean either physical sickness or spiritual sickness. This includes those who are distressed, discouraged and weary. When God sees us suffering under bondage to our sins, hurting our relationships with others and struggling in our continuous mistakes, his primary concern is to heal us. James tells us that when we come together in prayer, we can be healed from any sickness or problem and our sins will be forgiven. It is a beautiful promise. But not just any empty words will suffice. For our prayers to be powerful and effective, James gives us three guidelines.

First, our prayers must be offered in faith. Faith means to believe that God has the power to do anything in our lives. Hebrews 11:6 says, “And without faith, it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” Only those who earnestly seek God through persistent prayer will experience God’s healing. One who doubts shouldn’t expect to receive anything from the Lord.

Second, our prayers and confessions are especially powerful when done together with others. I’m so thankful to God for all my brothers and sisters in Christ who have borne my many weaknesses and prayed for me.

Finally, James tells us that it is only the prayer of a righteous man (or woman) that is powerful and effective. This means that God listens to those who are right with him while ignoring the pleas of those who pray with sinful motives. The prayers of those who walk blamelessly before God ride the express lane to God’s ear. He is quick to act on behalf of his most devoted servants.

To prove this last point, James uses Elijah as an example. We remember Elijah as being such a righteous man. But James starts by saying, “Elijah was a man just like us” (17a). This can be translated as “a man of like feeling” or “a man of similar suffering.” As great as Elijah was, he was still just a man like any of us. His life was full of spiritual highs as well as lows. But what really made Elijah righteous before God was his sincere faith that was manifested through his prayer life. James says, “He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops” (17b-18). In a sense, there is nothing really extraordinary here on Elijah’s part. Elijah simply prayed for the rains to be withheld. However, his words must have been filled with sincerity and passion. The Lord heard Elijah and responded by holding back the rains for three and a half long years. Then, when God wanted the rains to return, Elijah went back to prayer. After praying once, he told his servant to check the skies for clouds but nothing could be seen. So Elijah kept on praying and told the servant seven times to go back. After this long period of persistence, finally a small cloud as large as a man’s hand could be seen rising from the sea. Eventually, the cloud grew to become a powerful thunderstorm and the floodgates of heaven were opened upon the entire land.

The chance to be part of something truly great for God’s glory is and always has been right in front of us. But the journey starts on our knees. When we trust in the power of our mighty God, we can ask for him to flood our world with spiritual healing and he will do it. Nothing is impossible for the one who prays. Through preparing this message, my weak prayer life was really exposed before God’s word. I rarely set aside time just to pray. But, this passage gives me renewed hope. Elijah was a man just like me. But when he disciplined himself to pray, nothing was impossible.

Through today’s passage, we learned that we can work for God’s kingdom with a farmer’s patience when we renew our hope in Jesus’ Second Coming. We also learned that we can obtain spiritual healing for ourselves and others when we pray with faith. May we all imitate the perseverance of Job and the prayer spirit of Elijah as we grow together in spiritual maturity.