

James 5:7-12

Positive Suffering

Today we come to the penultimate section in James' down-to-earth epistle and it might be of particular interest to those who support the England cricket team! It's headed up in your Bible - 'Patience in suffering'. But... let me say right away – James was not into pity parties. He wasn't writing to encourage people to wallow in their troubles and say, "Woe is me. I've got it so tough." No, for James, it wasn't so much a wringing of the hands he was encouraging, it was the squaring of the shoulders and the setting of the jaw that he wanted to see. The standing firm and the refusal to give up. There is a right way to suffer! That's what we are looking at today.

But, before I go any further let me say that I do not believe that all suffering comes from God or from Satan, directly. Much, indeed most, of the suffering I see in people's lives is self-inflicted! Bad attitudes; bad habits; bad time management.

I hear people complaining that they are suffering in their marriage yet they never go out together, don't talk except to criticise and refuse to get help. Of course your marriage is going suffer if you behave like that!

I hear people complaining that their health is bad and yet they don't exercise, eat poorly and drink too much. Of course your body is going to complain at that treatment.

My kids are rebelling – have you spent time with them nurturing your relationship? No! Self inflicted wounds.

My finances are in a mess. Do you budget carefully and tithe properly? No?
Self-inflicted suffering.

I'm sorry if that sounds a bit harsh, and of course I exaggerate to make a point. None of those issues are as black and white as I've painted them. But I want you to be honest here – am I wrong? So much of the suffering that we go through can be summed up in a few words from Paul in Galatians 6:7, "*A man reaps what he sows.*" Our counselors' couches are full of people reaping what they have sown. Be careful that you don't fool yourself into believing that your self-inflicted wounds are anything other than exactly that. Let's not blame God when the blame might lie closer to home.

So, with that proviso in mind, how should we behave when we are genuinely suffering for the sake of the gospel? Well, in v7 James urges the oppressed believers to *be patient* in the face of bullying from their rich oppressors, and he adds a reason to be patient - its because the Lord is coming again. Let me just explain what I mean by Jesus 'coming again' just in case this is a new concept for you.

Last week at Easter we celebrated Jesus rising bodily from the tomb after having been crucified and certified dead. Within a month of him rising from the grave Jesus gathered his disciples one last time and told them that he was about to go to be with his Father. As he left he reassured them all that he would be coming back

one more time to take them, and all true believers, to be with him forever. This event, which we are still anticipating, has been called his 'Second Coming' and it's to this that James is referring in v7 and v8. The thought that Jesus was coming again provided great hope for the persecuted church of James' day. I wonder if the concept of Jesus coming again has any influence at all in the way that we live our lives and the attitudes that we display towards difficult times?

I think of the old Negro Spirituals that were written by slaves in the middle of the most appalling suffering. Many of these old hymns expressed a hope that Jesus would come again and rescue them out of their circumstances – 'Swing Low Sweet Chariot' being an obvious example. Does the prospect of Jesus' return have any impact on your life today? Maybe we don't know what real suffering is?

You would have heard two weeks ago from Ron about the rich oppressors who were lording it over the Christians just because their wealth had bought them power. James has warned them already that Christ will be returning to judge them and he repeats that warning in v9. The result was that these poor, browbeaten Christians were able to endure the persecution knowing that there was coming a day when there would be relief from all the pain. The very looking forward to that event made the persecution endurable. Think of it this way. I don't know if you've ever been going through a very difficult time at your work for instance? Every day is just a nightmare but you know that in a few weeks time you're going on holiday so you count the days down until you can escape. The very fact of the holiday looming up

in the future is often enough to keep you going through the difficult times. This belief that Jesus would come again is what kept the early Christians persevering in James' day.

Almost 2000 years later and we are still waiting for that great day to come but things are so cushy for us in the West that most of us are not really looking forward to that day any more. There is a very real danger for many of us that we have crossed the road from identifying with the poor oppressed believers of this week to being more at home with the rich oppressors of two weeks ago. Maybe not directly, but if we are demanding cheaper and cheaper clothes and shoes and food with scant regard for those who are paying the price in sweat shops around the world then we have become the oppressor by proxy. As Christians we really do need to examine our buying habits and try to make them as ethical as possible. Yes it takes a bit more effort to buy ethically, but if we want to take our faith seriously it's an effort we need to be making. If we just ignore the effects of our rampant consumerism then it's no wonder that we are not looking forward to the second coming of Jesus ...because he will come as our Judge.

At any rate, given that God's word is quite clear and certain about the fact of Jesus' second coming, how should we be living in the light of it? James in this section encourages us to suffer, when we do suffer, with a positive attitude.

The first positive way to face suffering is with patience. Twice in verses 7 & 8 he

tells us to 'be patient'. Living as a real Christian in our society is not an easy way of life. There will be all sorts of problems and difficulties that arise purely because we are Christians. In this situation, being patient can be viewed as being weak. Think of your own work situation or family situation. Have you ever felt like just losing control and absolutely blasting the person who's causing you stress? If only you didn't have the restriction of having to behave like a Christian! But you do – we cannot indulge ourselves in impatient, bad behaviour. I had a boss who was so bad tempered that he literally threw the phone through a closed upstairs window in a fit of temper. He used his temper to intimidate people, including me, and often I wanted to yell back at him. But because I was very conscious of my Christian testimony I remained calm. In the end his temper came to the attention of his superiors and he was fired and those of us who were more patient won the day. Patience is not weakness; in fact patience can be an incredibly strong thing.

But, having said that, let's not make the mistake of confusing patience with inactivity. Being patient is not just a matter of sitting around moping. The example in v7 of the farmer is inserted to make us aware that we are to be busy in our patient waiting. The farmer doesn't just plant the seed then sit back. No he sprays, weeds and waters. He services his equipment and ensures that his barns are in good order so that when the harvest does arrive he's ready. So it is with us - our patient waiting for the return of Christ is a busy time of planning and preparation.

The second positive way to face suffering is to 'stand firm' in your faith. (v8) At

the risk of stating the obvious, how can we stand firm if we don't know what we're supposed to be standing for? That's why it's so important for us to get to grips with what the Bible teaches and that will require real discipline and application on your part. It might mean setting aside a night a week where you do a regular Bible study on your own. It might mean joining a home group or forming a small discipleship triplet or getting a prayer partner. There are many ways that we can increase our spiritual strength and make it less likely that we will fall away when the going gets tough. Only as we get to grips with what God says in his word can we become, as Paul puts it in 2 Timothy 3:17, "*thoroughly equipped for every good work*". Much of that 'standing firm' needs to be done in private, but it's easier to stand firm together.

The third positive way to face up to suffering is to create a caring and encouraging atmosphere in the church by stopping the grumbling against each other (v9). I covered this in detail in a previous sermon so I'm not going to cover it again today except to say that v9 is telling us that if God so chose he could complain, condemn and criticise us all day, every day but what he chose to do instead was to extend forgiveness to us and allow us to experience his grace. When we reach a more complete understanding of who we are, and what we've been forgiven from, we will not so readily grumble about others all the time. Here are 3 quick suggestions that might be of help to you if you suspect that you have a tendency to grumble:-

1. Practice the art of praying for those whom you are tempted to criticise.

2. Practice the art of saying nothing if there is nothing good to say.

3. Practice the art of forgiving the weaknesses of others because they are your brothers or sisters.

v10-11 calls our attention to the prophets in general, and Job in particular, who stood firm in their faith despite enormous persecution. Do you see what James says about them? They were blessed – why? Because they suffered? No! Because they persevered! They did not give up. And in due course God vindicated all of them. I personally believe that perseverance is one of the great secrets to success in any walk of life. So many people give up just inches away from their goal. If they had only kept going they would have seen the fruits of their labours but they gave up, disillusioned and bitter. Yet they were so close. Become a person of perseverance. Read the biography of Thomas Edison (the inventor of the light bulb amongst other things) if you want to understand what perseverance means.

And finally, v11 - *“The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.”* God is not some harsh despot out to break the spirit of his people until they are reduced to obedient robots. Any suffering we are going through has a positive purpose and most often that only becomes apparent in retrospect. Many of us can look back on times of suffering and, whilst having no desire to repeat them, would readily admit that they have been the making of us and brought us to a new awareness of God and his goodness and faithfulness. He is full of compassion and mercy and only by persevering through our pain will that become apparent.

Try it this week. Try to be patient in a circumstance when normally you'd be impatient. Stand firm when you feel like giving up. Let's not leave this sermon in church - take it to work and see the difference it makes.