

JAMES 5:10-11
“IN THE FACE OF SUFFERING”

“It is impossible for one to live without tears who considers things exactly as they are.” So said Gregory of Nyssa - a leader in the early church.

Let’s translate his words to today: if you turn off your Wii, your video games, your iPods, your television, and everything else that amuses you...and if you shove away the alcohol and the drugs and everything else that numbs you...if you open your eyes and see your world as it really is, you cannot help but shed tears in your heart, and even from your eyes.

As we continue our journey through the book of James, the inspired apostle is still writing about patience in a world of tears.

Two weeks ago, we learned that patience is when we put our hands to the plow and do our work, yet turn our eyes to the sky and trust in God to provide. We do this with strong hearts, as we live before the Savior who comes now by his Spirit and will return in judgment and mercy.

Last week, we learned that patience is also a relational issue. When tears fill our hearts and our eyes, we tend to turn against each other and grumble against each other. Instead, we should embrace and encourage one another.

Today, James continues to guide us about patience, by reminding us of biblical examples of people who considered things exactly as they are, lived with tears, but endured with patience. In verse 10, he writes of people living with patience “in the face of suffering.” He may be thinking about suffering in general, but he is probably thinking first of the evil we may face when we serve and follow Jesus. James first reveals how life will be, then he reminds us of how God will bless, as we consider things exactly as they are, and live with tears.

Let’s start with **HOW LIFE WILL BE**. When you cannot amuse yourself anymore, when you cannot numb yourself anymore, and when you begin to truly live for Jesus Christ, what will life be like? Men will hate, and God may hide.

MEN WILL HATE. James writes in verse 10, “Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.” The prophets were God’s spokesmen in the Old Testament. They proclaimed the truth of God, about the sin of man. How did the people respond? Often, with hatred.

We could cite all sorts of examples - examples that may have been familiar to James’ readers. But let’s just use one: Jeremiah. In the first chapter of Jeremiah’s book, God calls Jeremiah to the ministry of being a prophet. We think of being called to the ministry, and we think of romantic notions of hearing the voice of God and speaking the words of God, all to the acclaim of adoring people. But listen to what God says to Jeremiah at the end of the chapter:

“Get yourself ready! Stand up and say to them whatever I command you. Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them. Today I have made you an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land - against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land. They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you.”

They will fight against you. You will serve me with your words and your deeds, and men will hate you for it. You will speak the truth, and they will hate your truth, and they will hate you for speaking the truth.

Was Jeremiah perfect? Are we perfect? Of course not. We may offend people as we speak and live. Sometimes people will hate us, not because we are speaking or living the truth, but because we are speaking and living lies, as we fool ourselves into thinking we are serving God.

But if we are believers in Jesus Christ, we are called to serve the living God who sent him to live, die and rise for us. Too often, I fear we expect people to love us for this. We want to be liked. We want people to think well of us, and to treat us well. So either we do not live openly for Jesus, or if we do, we are shocked when people hate and oppose us.

During the month of November, mission organizations encourage us to remember Christians who are persecuted around the world. Each week in our e-newsletter, I provide you with information on a different country where people are suffering and dying for their faith. It may all seem so distant. But James shows us that if our faith is real, it should be changing our lives, and if it is, and we are living the truth and speaking the truth, we will be hated.

Here is one example of this: the “exclusivity” of Jesus Christ. Jeremiah preached that there is only one true God. All other “gods” are fake. His listeners did not like this. In our day, people do not like it when we tell them that there is only one Savior for people before God. In our culture, which resembles Jeremiah’s culture more than you know, we don’t mind people saying Jesus is a Savior. But the only Savior? The only way to God? If you say that, you are hating, and you should be hated.

I would like to stand here and say, “Love Jesus, and you will be loved.” But that would not be the truth. Often, the truth is the opposite: “Love Jesus, and you will be hated.”

Young people, love Jesus by saying that the universe is not here by chance, but by the word of a powerful, personal God, and you will be hated. Father or mother, love Jesus by teaching your child to show people Jesus, and you will be hated. Christian, love Jesus by telling your relatives at Thanksgiving that he is the only way to God, and you will be hated. Christian, love Jesus by giving up a sporting activity so you can worship him on Sunday, and you will be hated. Christian, love Jesus by refusing to lie for your boss, and you will be hated.

How life will be...men will hate. And *GOD MAY HIDE*. In verse 11, James writes about Job: “You have heard about Job’s perseverance...” We know Job. He is the fellow in the Old Testament who is minding his own business when Satan, with God’s permission, proceeds to shred him. His children are killed, his wealth is lost, his health is shattered, and his wife is faithless. Then his friends come along, and he has to suffer through an avalanche of words that do not help him. He wonders where God is. Then at the end of this agonizing book, God finally speaks. But have you ever noticed that in God’s speech, he never tells Job where he has been all this time, and why he has allowed all of this to happen to Job?

It seems the news is getting worse and worse. In this life, if we are truly striving to serve God out of love for his Son Jesus, not only will men hate us, but God may hide from us. We may walk through deep struggles because of our faith, and God does not promise to quickly and easily resolve it all.

Yesterday was Halloween, but it was also the day the church calls “Reformation Day.” On that day in 1517, a young monk named Martin Luther asked some questions of the Roman Catholic Church, and the Reformation was born. But those questions were forged through the life of a man who lived with tears. Ten years after Luther asked his questions, he and his friends were still fighting for the truth, and still fighting for their lives. In one especially dark season, Luther wrote to a friend, “For more than a week I have been thrown back and forth in death and Hell; my whole body feels beaten, my limbs are still trembling. I almost lost Christ completely, driven about on the waves and storms of despair and blasphemy against God.”

“I almost lost Christ completely.” It is the call of the writer of Psalm 10: “Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” It is the cry of the writer Psalm 88: “Why, O Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?” It is the request of the writer of Psalm 102: “Do not hide your face from me when I am in distress.”

God may hide. I would like to stand here and say, “You will always understand God and his ways. But that would not be the truth. Often the truth is, “You may not understand God and his ways.” God may hide what he is doing, and you may feel he is hiding even himself, as you live in this world of tears.

You may not understand God and his ways, as you try to sort through the tragedy that took the life of your friend. You may not understand God and his ways, as you see your spouse run from God, instead of to God, in times of trouble. You may not understand God and his ways, as your employer treats you like trash. You may not understand God and his ways, as you enter a time of not knowing who you are, or even why you are on this earth. You may not understand God and his ways, as you are sickened by the sight of injustice in

this world, or in your life.

Men will hate. God will hide. This is how life will be in a broken world, and this is how life will be for us, if we strive to serve Jesus Christ. Yet God still calls his people to be patient, and to be long-suffering, and to stand strong for him, and to persevere, even as men will hate and even as he may hide.

How can he do this? How can we do this? We have to mine the gold of all of James' words here. It may feel a little hard to believe right now, but these words are ultimately designed to encourage us. Even as James confronts us with the reality of how life will be in this world of tears, he also comforts us with words about **HOW GOD WILL BLESS**. He writes in verse 11, "As you know, we consider blessed those who persevered." They were patient. They were long-suffering. They stood strong. They persevered. God blessed as they did this, and God blessed after they did this. How? How does God bless in this world of tears?

First, *WITH HIS PLAN*. Let's listen to the whole sentence about Job: "You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about." At the end of the agonizing story of Job, God does not explain everything. But he restores what Job has lost, and Job is able to carry on living, secure in the hope that he has a Living Redeemer.

This Redeemer is Jesus. Remember - this section on patience is about the second coming of Jesus. As we live in this world of tears, James reminds us that God will "finally bring about" this. While much is hidden from us, this is not hidden from us. Just as God finally brought about new life for Job, God will finally bring about new life for his people, with the return of Jesus in judgment and mercy. He will bring a new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness dwells, and where there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. God blesses us with his promise, and in the face of suffering, this truth provides hope and help.

I am not much of a movie person. But I like one kind of movie - adventure movies. I don't like a lot of blood and gore, but I love to see people flying around and doing things that no one could ever do except in the movies. I also like this: you know that in the end, the hero will prevail. Here he is, hanging by only two fingers that are keeping him from a fall into an endless abyss, and the bad guy is stomping on both of those fingers, but you know somehow he will get out of this and ultimately emerge triumphant.

We do not enjoy suffering the way we enjoy adventure movies, but they are alike in this way: we know the good guy will win. Even as we suffer before men who hate us, and even as we suffer with a sense that God is hiding from us in some way, we know that the day is coming when Jesus' victory will be obvious for all to see. He is the Hero of all of history, and no matter what is happening now, we know he will triumph in the end.

Imagine, if you will, suffering without the hope of the final victory of Jesus Christ. Imagine suffering as all people do, or imagine suffering for Jesus, with no hope in Jesus. You do not know who will prevail in the end. You do not have any confidence that God will take the wrong and make it right. What a discouraging thought. What a devastating thought. How can you go on? From where do you summon the spirit to take even another breath?

Jesus is coming again. He will triumph over his enemies, and every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Wrong will be made right. Hurting will be healed. God's people of all nations will be welcomed into an eternity of no more tears, and no more pain.

With this assurance of the completion of God's plan, with our understanding of what God will finally bring about, we are patient. We are long-suffering. We stand strong. We persevere. We know that our present troubles are "light and momentary" compared to the glory that awaits us. The struggle is real and hard. But it is not forever. It is nothing compared to forever. If you think you are on the road to nowhere, you will give up. But if you know you are on the road to glory, you will never give up. You will be strong in the grace and hope and joy of Jesus.

How do you suffer today? More to James' point - how do you suffer for Jesus? I do not hope you are suffering for Jesus, but I hope you are living in a way that could lead to suffering for Jesus. Maybe you care deeply for someone who hates you for loving Jesus. Maybe you feel desperately lonely because no one around

you seems to want to follow Jesus. Maybe you grieve because you see the heartache of someone who does not know Jesus. Maybe you have tried to tell someone about Jesus, and they are running from you now. Maybe you have sought to live with honesty and integrity because of Jesus, and it is being thrown back in your face. May God bless you today, tomorrow, and every day, with the assurance of his plan.

But James reveals another blessing here. God blesses with his plan, and God blesses *WITH HIS HEART*. James closes this section with these encouraging words: “The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.” Men will hate. He may hide. But he is still full of compassion and mercy for his people, especially as they strive to live faithfully for him.

What are compassion and mercy? They are simply words to describe this: God is moved to care for his people. He is not heartless. He is not unconcerned. He is not distant. While he and his purposes may seem hidden from us, he is still present and powerful for his people.

How do we know this? We know this because of James’ brother Jesus. The Son of God is the ultimate and decisive display of the love of God. As Paul declares to the Romans in Romans 5, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” God did not love us because we are good. God loved us because he is good. And he did not love us in a small, short-term way. He loved us in a great, eternal way, by giving his Son for our sins, so that we might be his children forever.

Now, as we live before God in Jesus Christ, we are assured of his compassionate and merciful attitude toward us. He is working for his glory and our good. He may not be pleased with all that we do, but we are still his children, and while he may still seem hidden from us and hard for us to understand, as we look to the cross, we are assured of his heart for us. As Paul also writes to the Romans, God is for us. What a beautiful truth! He has made us his own through his Son, so he is always and eternally for us, even in the face of suffering in a world of tears.

What a great comfort that is! But I believe it is also a challenge - to see the evidence of the abundance of his compassion and mercy. As I walk through this world, and as I see too well how things are, and as my heart weeps, often for some of you, this is the prayer that is more and more on my heart. “God, you have revealed your truth to them. They are yours through Jesus. Nothing will ever separate them from your love. Your purposes for them may sometimes be hidden, but they are always for their good. Help them to see this. Help them to see you. Remove the blinders from their eyes and heart, and even through the tears of this world, may they see the evidence of the abundance of your grace.

“May they see how you give strength for each day. May they see how you help them to not fret over the opinions of others. May they see the beauty of creation, even in the ugliness of the brokenness of the world. May they be blessed with the embrace of a friend, who cannot change what is happening, but who can encourage them. May they laugh, even through tears. May they know the mystery of your presence and power, even when much remains mysterious to them.”

Pastor Andy Stanley tells the story of once going with a friend on a boat to retrieve another boat. By the time they headed back with two boats, it was getting dark. This was a problem for two reasons: the second boat had no lights, and Andy did not know the way back. His friend decided the best plan was to have Andy drive the boat with lights and follow his friend, who put a flashlight on the back of his boat so Andy could follow his boat. They crawled through the darkness and finally reached the harbor. But the harbor lights made it hard for Andy to keep his eyes trained on his friend’s boat, and Andy was soon lost. He nervously drifted along the coastline, looking for a sign of the right light. By the mercy of God, he made it into harbor without damaging other boats or killing himself.

Jesus Christ is our light. He is the dazzling demonstration of the love and grace and mercy and compassion of God. In this world of tears, in the face of suffering, our call is to keep our eyes on that great light, even when men hate us, and even when that light seems hard to find.

I ask again: how do you suffer today? What reminds you that you live in a world of tears? If you are one with Jesus Christ through faith in his death to give you life, you know the love of God. That promise is

sure and secure. Your call is to fix your eyes on the light of God's mercy and compassion. You will be tempted to fixate on the hatred of people, or on what you cannot see and know about God. But you know and possess all you need: the love of God, demonstrated on the cross, and displayed each day in his compassion and mercy. May that love guide you in all of your journeys, and may you live with patience and long-suffering and strength and perseverance, until the day when Jesus returns to take you to glory.