

FAITH UNDER FIRE

Jas 5:7-20

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I am quite sure that some of you have heard the quip about the man who prayed for patience: “Lord, give me patience and give it to me *now!*” Or perhaps you may have seen the cartoon in which a man is kneeling beside his bed and praying: “Is there some way You could help me, but make it look like I did it all myself?” Patience . . . prayer . . . among other subjects such as swearing and sinning, the New Testament Letter of James has something to say about patience and prayer as it comes to a conclusion.

Last Sunday, we studied Jas 4:11-5:6, where James warns his readers about the pitfalls of pride by providing three examples of arrogance. Now, in 5:7-20, James turns from condemnation to edification. Verses 7-11 are tied closely to the preceding six verses of chapter 5, and here James encourages patient endurance in the presence of poverty and persecution. The theme of this section is *the patience of faith*. Verses 12-20 are the wrap-up of James’ work, and here James emphasizes the communal nature of faith. The prominent theme of this section is *the prayer of faith*.

As much as I would like to jump into a discussion of prayer, we will have to wait. After all, we must first learn about patience. We begin, then, with Jas 5:7-11.

⁷Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. ⁹Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! ¹⁰As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful (Jas 5:7-11, NRSV).

James, the prophet of *faith that works*, now becomes the prophet of *faith that waits*. He combines endurance with expectation and counsels his readers to eagerly wait. Eagerly wait . . . that’s not a bad description of how folks get up and get ready for work. They rush around the house only to be caught in rush-hour traffic. As someone has put it, “We

hurry up and wait.”

We cannot read vv. 7-11 separately from vv. 1-6. The Christian community to which James writes was suffering oppression and exploitation by wealthy landowners who were living lives of luxury at the expense of others. James is calling on Christians *not* to take the judgment of the wicked into their own hands, but to wait for the coming Christ to punish the evil-doers. Furthermore, Christians must not compromise the faith, either by giving in to the world or by attacking the world. But waiting for God to act is a long process, so James gives an example of such patience from everyday life: “Behold, the farmer . . .” The picture is that of the small farmer in Palestine who plants his carefully saved seed and hopes for a harvest, living on short rations and suffering hunger during the last weeks. The farmer must exercise patience no matter how hungry he is, for he waits with a view toward the coming harvest.

Waiting is not easy. Impatience with God can lead to impatience with God’s people. The heavy burden of hardship can cause Christians to grumble against one another. The church can become a community of competition rather than a community of cooperation. To strengthen the Christians to stand fast under the pressure of poverty and persecution, James refers to two examples of others who have stood firm. First, there is the general example of the endurance of “the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.” It was Jesus who said,

¹¹“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt 5:11-12, NIV).

Second, there is the specific example of Job. From the Old Testament Book of Job, Job does not present a picture of patience. Perseverance, yes; patience, no. However, James seems to be citing a traditional understanding such as that found in the apocryphal book *The Testament of Job* with its portrayal of the patient Job. And those who know the story of Job “have seen the purpose of the Lord”; that is, they know that, in the end, the Lord blessed Job. At the beginning of James’ letter, a blessing is pronounced upon those who endure (1:12); and now, at the end of his letter, a blessing is promised for those who endure (5:11).

The phrase “above all” in v. 12 marks the beginning of the end of the epistle. James wraps up his letter by dealing with three issues, all of which involve speech: the taking of frivolous vows (v. 12), mutually praying for both physical and spiritual needs (vv. 13-18), and teaching sinners the truth (vv. 19-20). Let’s read together 5:12-20.

¹²Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your “Yes” be yes and your “No” be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.

¹³Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. ¹⁴Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. ¹⁶Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. ¹⁷Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

¹⁹My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, ²⁰you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins (Jas 5:12-20, NRSV).

In v. 12, James says, “Let your ‘Yes’ be yes and your ‘No’ be no”; in other words, keep your speech simple and sincere. Once again, James echoes Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:34-37). Swearing is unnecessary where truth is recognized and truthfulness is respected. The word of the Christian should be so consistent and so dependable that no oath is needed to support it.

James, the prophet of *faith that works*, now becomes the prophet of *prayer that works*. In vv. 13-18 James goes from suffering to joy and back to suffering. The Christian who is suffering trials and tribulations is to pray. He or she should cry out to God and trust Him to right the wrong and remedy the evil. On the other hand, the Christian who is joyful should sing and praise God. God is to be remembered in all situations, good as well as bad. Finally, the Christian who is suffering sickness should pray. The “anointing with oil”—is the oil used for medicinal purposes or for symbolic purposes? Although the use of oil in healing was common in the ancient world, the function of the oil in this scripture is probably symbolic: it is a sign of God’s concern for and faithfulness to His people; specifically, it shows that the sick person is being set apart

for God’s special attention in prayer. James’ point is that the power to heal is not in any practice—such as anointing with oil; it is not in any person—such as an elder; and, it is not in prayer *per se*. It is God’s power that brings healing, and prayer is the channel through which God’s power is conveyed. Through the elders’ prayer of faith, God bestows healing and forgiveness to the sick person. Sin and sickness went hand-in-hand in the ancient world, and James implies that sometimes sin is a cause of illness as well as a hindrance to healing. The promised result—“the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up”—is this a promise of immediate physical healing or is it a promise of immediate spiritual healing or is it a promise of resurrection to life at the coming of Christ? Exactly when does the saving and raising take place? Since elsewhere in James the Greek word for “save” refers to ultimate salvation at the end of time,¹ I am inclined to take the promise in v. 15 as a reference to the salvation of body and soul at the coming of Christ. I must confess, however, that I am by no means certain about this interpretation.

Having connected healing with the forgiveness of sin, it is not surprising to see James take up the matter of mutual confession of sin to one another and mutual praying for one another. To incite his readers to pray, James inspires them with the example of Elijah. According to legend, and not the Old Testament, Elijah was a well-known person with a reputation for prayer. Interestingly, James depicts Elijah as just “an average Joe,” and says in effect, “If he could do it, so can you.” It is the “ordinary” Christian who is living righteously, not just the elders or prophets, whose prayer is powerful and effective.

James concludes in vv. 19-20 with a final exhortation that is a summons to action. The “multitude of sins” does not describe the state of the sinner; it describes the scope of the forgiveness. It may also suggest that the sins that are “covered” are the sins that might have been committed if the sinner had not been corrected. This final exhortation flows naturally out of the theme of confession and forgiveness in vv. 13-18, and it reveals the reason for James’ writing of his letter; namely, *to prevent any of his readers from wandering from the truth and to plead for those who may have already done so*. James,

¹σῶζω (*sōzō*) is used in its eschatological sense in 1:21; 2:14; 4:12; 5:20—5:15 would then constitute the exception. Although this view is consistent within James, it must be admitted that the verb σῶζω (*sōzō*) often refers to physical healing in the Gospels. Similarly, the verb ἐγείρω (*egeirō*) reflects the language of

then, concludes with the purpose of his work. He does not discuss sin simply to criticize or to condemn. He discusses sin to point out to erring Christians the results of their behavior and to bring them back to where they belong. He hopes to save them from damnation and to secure forgiveness for their sins. And it is this goal that he urges on his readers, encouraging them to follow in his steps and take up where he ends.

As I pondered the passage we have examined today, two thoughts struck me with surprising force. *First, faith is a family matter.* As we have seen, James has much to say about the nature of saving, serving, and sustaining faith. But when it comes time to finish his letter, he emphasizes the communal nature of faith. Christians are not isolated individuals who try to have faith in God apart from and away from the people of faith. Faith is a family matter, and we need both a faithful God and the faithful people of God if we are to be people of faith. Furthermore, our faith is not meant to be for our sole benefit. “Our faith is like a doorway through which people around us are benefited. Prayers of faith are of concrete value not only for ourselves, but for others as well. This means that our trust in God benefits other people.”²

Second, our belief in the hereafter affects our behavior in the here-and-now, and what we do in the here-and-now affects what will be done to us in the hereafter. What we are after here will determine what we receive in the hereafter. What will you believe? What will you do? What will it be, here and now, that will decide what it will be in the hereafter?

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New Testament healing stories, but it is also regularly applied to resurrection in the New Testament.

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