



Pastor Steven Billings

**Sermon for Advent 3**

December 11, 2022

## The Patience of Martyrs

### James 5:7–11

*<sup>7</sup> Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. <sup>8</sup> You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. <sup>9</sup> Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. <sup>10</sup> As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. <sup>11</sup> Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.*

If there's anything the world needs right now, it's patience. We seem, even in the church, to be desperately short on patience, and disturbingly short with each other. The Advent season comes at us like a freight train, and there's so much to do, so many decisions to make, so many demands pressed down upon our shoulders, that the stress approaches dangerous levels. What can you do? Some people drink – or turn to other chemical means – in order to relax. Some work out. Some go for a walk. Some crawl into a hole and don't come until New Year's.

If you're one of those who craves comfort at this time of year, I think you're going to like what St. James has for us today in our epistle. These words of encouragement from the Lord might be exactly what your soul has been longing for.

Believers in the early Church were frustrated. Jesus had promised to return, but that was nearly 50 years ago. What's He waiting for? Why's He taking so long? Jesus said that the end would come before the current generation passes away. Shouldn't that be about . . . *now*?!

Their frustration was heightened by increasing persecution against the followers of Jesus. The Apostle James – not the writer of the epistle, but the brother of the Apostle John – had been martyred a scant four years previously, and it was becoming evident that such persecution was a sign of things to come.<sup>1</sup> So, those to whom James, the half brother of Jesus, was writing were afraid . . . and stressed out . . . and needed some words of calm assurance.

He begins this portion of his letter by saying, “Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord.” My dear brothers, the Lord is coming, just as He said He would. He's never lied to us; we don't expect Him to start now. But you must be patient.

Then he gives them an every day example of the kind of patience he's talking about. The farmer knows that the harvest is coming. He's done everything within his power to have a successful crop. He's planted, fertilized, cultivated. But, ultimately, he has to wait



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for the rain; he can't do anything to make it rain. And, when the rain doesn't come when expected . . . he must be patient, knowing that the rain will come; it just may not come when he wants it to. So, for you, my brothers, waiting for the return of Christ, be patient like that, knowing the time is coming; it just may not come when you want it to. But, be encouraged, the return of our Savior is very near. "The coming of the Lord is at hand," he says. When the time is right, He'll be here.

In the meantime, don't grumble at each other. You see, people haven't changed all that much. Just like you have a bad day and go home and crab at your wife – or you husband – or your kids – James' audience had been taking their frustration out on each other. Don't do that, he says. Be careful that you don't bring yourself under judgment. Listen, the Judge – whose appearing you crave – is poised to bring the hammer down; He's right outside the door! Do you want Him walking in and seeing you behave so badly toward those He loves? God knows we get perturbed, He knows what frustrates us, but lashing out at each other doesn't help; it doesn't improve our conditions one iota. In fact, it nearly always makes things worse. The very people He's given you to help carry you through these difficult days end up being the ones who take the brunt of your bad behavior. And, you know what? The person you're treating badly is just as frustrated as you, and for many of the same reasons. Why do you want to add to their anxiety? No, God is not pleased by this; don't forget, James warns of impending judgment upon those who do this. So, do yourself a favor, put a civil tongue in your head, be a support to your brothers and sisters in Christ, and don't give God more cause to judge you than He already has.

Pastor, I thought you said this would be comforting. Be patient; I'm getting to that. And so is James.

"Do want some examples of those who have been patient before you?" he seems to ask. How about the prophets? There's not a one of them who lived a peaceful life. Many of them were martyred by their own people! Isaiah was sawn in two. Jeremiah – who wept bitter tears over the rebellion of his people against their God – was thrown into a cistern, where he sank into the mud and was left to die. Elijah, though he did have a happy end, had to run for his life from his own king and queen who wanted to kill him. John the Baptist was beheaded for speaking the truth about his king's illegal and immoral marriage to his brother's wife. We could go on all day about the martyrs and what sort of patience they had to have in the face of real life-and-death peril. As I mentioned, James, the brother of John, had already been martyred. Others were to follow, including the writer of this epistle. They gave their lives in the face of persecution – again, from their own people. One account says that James was thrown from the pinnacle of the temple by the scribes and pharisees, and was beaten to death with a club, because the fall didn't do the job.

Then, of course, there's the example of Job, who didn't die a martyr, but was called upon to exercise great patience, nonetheless. In a single day Job lost everything he had. He'd been a wealthy man, with servants, flocks, herds, many children. They were all gone



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in a day, except for a few servants who escaped to come and tell him about each disaster as it occurred, and a wife who told him to curse God and die. Well, he never cursed God, even when sores covered his body from head to foot and his friends sat around and told him that it was all his fault. God eventually restored him so that in the end, he had more than he started out with.

I know, you're still waiting for the comfort. Well, here it comes.

"Behold," James says, "we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is abundantly<sup>2</sup> compassionate and merciful."

James' words here bring to mind the occasion in Acts 5, where the apostles, having been beaten for preaching in the name of Jesus, rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for the name of Christ.<sup>3</sup> This story has been repeated countless times in the lives of the martyrs for millennia, beginning with Stephen the deacon, who prayed as he was being stoned to death for proclaiming the truth of Christ, in words sounding very much like those of Jesus as He hung on the cross: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."<sup>4</sup> Peter, desiring not to dishonor his Master, insisted on being crucified upside down. St. Lawrence, a deacon in Spain during the third century – for whom our local university was named – was slain on a gridiron over an open fire. He is said to have called out cheerfully after a time: "You can turn me over now; I'm done on this side!"

Each of the martyrs has a similar story. The Lord granted them great patience under extreme and deadly persecution. As a pastor, I've seen many church members suffering all kinds of ills: difficulties in their families, loss of employment, great illness, and, yes, even persecution. While such difficulties do cause enormous amounts of stress, somehow, when things became increasingly worse, the Lord provided a peace that truly passes understanding. It's a little like King David, when his infant son by Bathsheba neared death. David prayed in sackcloth and ashes, but when the son died, David got up, bathed, shaved, and put on fresh clothes. The worst thing that could have happened, happened: his baby boy died, yet God gave peace in the midst of sorrow. I could tell you story after story of those to whom I have been privileged to minister and how they testified with great confidence their faith in the Savior of us all.

James says to his readers: "You have seen the purpose of the Lord." So have you, beloved. Time and time again, God has proved His faithfulness to you. And what have you seen? What is God's clear purpose toward you? "The Lord is abundantly compassionate and merciful." David says it three times in the Psalms: "The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy."<sup>5</sup> You are loved, dear friends. Why do you think I refer to you so often as "beloved?" Yes, I do love you, but my love pales in comparison to the One who sent His Son to earn your salvation, but who does not, then, leave you to your own devices, but continues to lavish His love on you throughout your life on earth, and on into life with Him in glory.

So, be patient, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. He *is* coming, just as He said



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He would. To some, it seems like He should have come a long time ago, but if He had come, say, 100 years ago or more, we wouldn't be here to go with Him when He does come. His timing is perfect, and it's part of His patience to wait until the time is right. So, you be patient, too, dear friends. If you find this to be a challenge, remember: He's only a prayer away. Ask for His help. And He'll give it to you, I promise. But, more importantly, you have His promise, guaranteed. To Him be glory now and forever. Amen.

1. The writer of the epistle was James the Elder, also known as James the Just, who was the half brother of Jesus.
2. The Greek word *polysplagchnos* carries with it the sense of deep feeling. Why the ESV renders it simply as "compassionate" is a mystery to me, for it misses an important nuance to James' message.
3. Acts 5:40-41. The whole account actually begins at 5:12, with the Lord performing many signs and wonders through the hands of the apostles.
4. Acts 7:60
5. Psalm 56:14; 103:8; 145:8