

Optimistic Patience

James 5:7-12

Troy Taylor

Picture this with me. A young child, about 3 years old, is brought into a room, and seated at a small table. There is a plate on the table, and a marshmallow on the plate. An adult is in there, who explains that they have to leave for a few minutes, and if the child does not eat the marshmallow before the adult returns, they will get not one, but two marshmallows.

This was an actual study done some years ago to test what is called delay of gratification — the ability to put off instant satisfaction for greater gain down the road.

I can tell you exactly how that conversation would have gone had I been the child. That researcher wouldn't have even started the instructions before I'd be asking, cheek bulging, where was this magical supply of more marshmallows they were talking about. . .

Delay of gratification. It makes some of us uncomfortable. Especially my generation — we live in a microwave world. Instant food, instant entertainment, instant information. Instant satisfaction at our fingertips.

James 5:7-12 calls us to a different picture of the world. A world where any kind of gratification is hard to find. Here is what it says.

7 Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. 8 You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. 9 Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!
10 Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. 11 As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.
12 Above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. All you need to say is a simple "Yes" or "No." Otherwise you will be condemned.

Remember who it is that James is writing this letter to. They are mostly Jewish, from Jerusalem, and spread out through the Roman empire because persecution has forced them from their homes, businesses, and lives. They are refugees, who have landed in areas that have established communities, and are trying to fit in. They are surrounded by wealthy, comfortable people, some of whom convert and join the churches that they plant, which leads to some interesting social dynamics about the use of wealth, treatment of the poor, and dependence on God that we have encountered so far in our series on James.

And these refugee Christians are now asking the question together, is God worth the wait? We've been answering this exact question in some way for the last several weeks.

Why would we wait for God?

The last two Sundays have been challenging sermons. First, we are reminded in James 4:13-17 that we aren't in control of anything. At all! This is something that the refugees in our communities know all too well. They came from real lives, with plans, hopes, dreams, and ideas

for their futures and the futures of their children! But at the end of the day, we humans are not powerful enough, strong enough, or in control enough to control our future. So we can't actually make plans independently from God.

Then last week Stephen reminded us that we aren't all that secure, either. We tend to depend on money, stuff, and the security that we surround ourselves with as a way of building a wall around ourselves, to keep the uncertainty of being out of control at bay. It gives us a sense of control, if we have enough in our bank account to pay for food not only today, but tomorrow, and in some cases, for years of retirement! But, James reminds us, that security is a false hope — not only is it uncertain, but it also endangers our relationship with God! Yikes!

So, what then are we to do?

In verses 7 and 8, James re-orient us. Having just established the futility of human control in planning for business, and then the corruption of business practices, we turn in James to what we should be like. And God bless southern Alberta, the example he holds up is a farmer.

Sit back, take a deep breath, and think like the farmer. Why, year after year, would a farmer invest hard earned money, putting perfectly good seed into the ground, burying it instead of grinding it for food?

Because a farmer is an optimist.

With good reason! Year in and year out, since humanity figured it out, we have seen that a seed buried has a little miracle in it — the potential to produce many times it's own amount in useable, edible food — if one has the patience to wait, and to suffer the loss of one seed for the gain of many.

The picture of the farmer gazing at an empty field is one of optimistic patience.

But waiting is really hard. Just ask a three-year-old with a marshmallow!

I have a couple of friends who are brothers. In their household, board games were a regular event. One of these games was the farming game. If you've never played it, prepare to invest a good amount of time in it.

After a few hours of mounting tension, one of the brothers would inevitably pick up the game board, and throw it across the room out of sheer frustration. When it isn't a game anymore, when the stakes get raised to life and death, or the health of my family is on the line, the pressure of waiting can become unbearable.

This is what verse 9 warns us about. When a community begins to face the kind of pressure that is happening in the church that James is writing to, it can become really easy to turn on each other. So, James takes a moment to tell this church that waiting can provide an opportunity to turn on each other, grumbling about the other.

"Why should they have everything, when I have nothing? Why are they driving another, new vehicle? My car won't even start! It's disgusting how wasteful they are"

Or from the other side.

“Why do they have to be here? Why can’t they keep moving on to another community? They are taking our jobs! They are a drain on our economy! Why won’t they just work? There are no free handouts. Why should I support them?”

Friends, a little bit of reflection time here. Have you ever caught yourself thinking these things? I know I have.

James knows how dangerous a little bit of self-indulgence can be when it turns us against others. Remember what we were warned about in chapter 3:7-10:

“All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.”

The pressure of waiting can break that community apart. It can also bond them together! We have countless examples of pressure building strong bonds — consider sports teams, military units, even families. To be a little bit cliché, pressure either results in diamonds, or an earthquake.

So then we wait patiently for God, and we exercise patience with each other.

So, why then, do we need verse ten and eleven? These verses are a reminder to look to the prophets! What was their example in the middle of hard living? The role of a prophet is to refocus all of life on the great story of God that is unfolding all around us.

When we are in the middle of trying times, of suffering from illness, or poverty, or hunger, one of the questions that comes to our mind is often, “Is this all that there is?”

The prophets remind us that this is, in fact, not all that there is. We can often become trapped in the belief that how the world is now is how it has always been. We can come to believe that suffering is natural. That death is supposed to happen. That we were created to be temporary, transient. Hopeless.

But this is not how we started out. Let’s take James’s advice, and look to Job for inspiration. In chapter 38-42, God speaks about creation, its order and its purpose as a creation of God Almighty! When we look at creation, back in Genesis, we notice one theme over and over and over again, seven times, in fact.

It was good!

Creation was made to be a place that flourishes with life, goodness, and relationship with the creator God. Death, suffering, and evil are not the natural state. The prophets remind us of this.

The Christian apostles also remind us that where we are now is not how things will end up. We are not trapped in an endless cycle of birth, life, and death, the circle of life. Creation has an end state that has been determined by the will of God almighty. What is that end state? Ephesians 1:8b-9 tells us the mystery of God’s will plainly.

“With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.”

Friends, we know the end of the story. It is a story of glory, of the return of Jesus, the risen, living Saviour of creation, God with us. In this end, all suffering, all evil, all manipulation, scheming, and power-plays are gone.

Just like the farmer staring out across an empty field, seeing a few short months into the future where it will be row on row of golden wheat waving in the wind, ripe for harvest and celebration, the prophets remind us to look out beyond ourselves, beyond our current world that is covered by the lie that evil is our natural state, and see the glorious future that God invites us into through Jesus Christ. And so we wait, with optimism!

But why? Why do we have to wait! Why can God not simply come now, and end all of this suffering, evil, and death? Why is he waiting?

2 Peter 3:9 offers us this:

“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

We wait because God is offering everyone the same choice as he has offered us: the choice to be part of His redeeming work of creation, of moving us all towards the unity of heaven and earth under Christ.

Two weeks ago, I was speaking with a fellow student who mentioned that his mother-in-law was not yet a Christian, and he was hoping that Jesus would delay his return long enough for her to repent, and follow him. His honesty moved me. What would I be willing to endure, if it meant that my mom could worship God, and live in the New Creation? What would I endure for my son to have that hope? What would I endure for one of you to share my future with God? What about a stranger?

Church, the new heaven and earth will be perfect, complete and full, in part because all who could possibly be there will be there! God alone knows when his new creation will be full. And so, we wait, with anticipation.

Our patient endurance is filled with the knowledge that we wait for one more person to come into the fullness of life that is following Jesus. We work in the sure and certain knowledge that Jesus is coming again, and he brings his Kingdom in its fullness with him.

In light of this, we take our proper perspective before God as humans. We cannot control the end, the next year, or even tomorrow. All such attempts are trying to take the place of God, providing for ourselves, seeing to our own security, needs, and desires. Giving our promise, as though we can offer more than a simple yes or no.

We simply cannot. However, we know the one who can secure us, provide for us, and give us a future. His name is Jesus. And because of his promise, we wait in optimistic patience.

Amen, come Lord Jesus.