

## **Faith that Works: Patience for Joy**

James 5:7-12

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~God is passionate about patience because our faith and joy requires it~

When I was a kid one of the things I heard my parents say repeatedly was that praying for patience was a bad idea. And the take away in this for me was that God was up in heaven watching us do life, and He kind of got His kicks from making things miserable here – kind of like a playground bully. He was bigger than us, and so praying for patience was like saying “I bet you can’t make my life any worse than it already is God...” It was like egging Him on. So growing up I never prayed for patience.

And patience is a funny thing. Even our society seems to be valuing it less and less. So I grew up here in PG and my grandparents lived in Vancouver and Kelowna. And so that meant about two 8-10 hour trips on the bench seat in the back of the pickup. Dad would drive, mom would oversee the snacks, and my sister and I had the job of not killing each other.

And so we had some activities up our sleeves to keep us busy. Are you ready for this? We would look out the window, and then we would play I Spy and the license plate game, which I’m pretty sure my mom just made up because there in no way to win. And then we would look out the window some more. And if we would ever think of doing something other than one of those pre-approved activities – say something like complaining about how hard it is to sit for 10 hours in the back seat, my dad had what he called an 8 foot long arm that could reach us anywhere in the car and convince us that it was a better idea to be quiet. Those were the good old days.

Now today cars come equipped with screens that kids can play movies and games on so they don’t even realize they are in the car – no patience is necessary.

And it’s not just kids. The other day I needed a coffee and pulled into the drive through at the Tim Horton’s on Victoria which I almost never go to. And there were something like 15 vehicles in front of me which is why I never go there. The line wrapped all the way around the parking lot and out onto the street. And I thought “oh, man! I don’t have time for this.” But I was stuck, there was already someone behind me. And so I turned on the radio to attempt to entertain myself and while I was trying to get the station off the one my wife likes and onto the good one most of the cars in front of me had disappeared.

Tim Horton's has two drive through order takers and they must have about 100 people inside filling cups. They know their customers aren't any good at patience, and they cater to that.

We are used to getting what we want now. So ten years ago if you had a question you might have to go to the library, hunt through the Dewey decimal system and actually look in a book. Google didn't know everything back then, but it does now and so there is no need for curiosity – in half a second you can get the answer. We've made patience irrelevant.

But in our text today James tells us that patience is different than we think. It certainly isn't about God toying with us, but it also isn't some outdated virtue that makes you a good person, instead it is the ticket to joy in God.

And as such God is actually passionate about our patience because He wants what is best for us and knows our faith and joy require it. And so praying "God give me patience" is one of the prayers the God who loves us loves to answer.

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If you haven't already please open your Bibles to James chapter 5 starting in verse 7. At the core of this passage is the thought: **God is passionate about patience because our faith and joy require it.**

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If you've been with us for the last several weeks you know that we are nearing the end of our jaunt through James where we have been looking at Faith that Works. This is faith beyond simple mental assent, or believing the right things about God without having them transform our lives, this is saving faith that holds water with Jesus.

Now James was Jesus' half brother. He grew up with Him, and at first he didn't believe in Jesus, but then Jesus did something he couldn't argue with – He came back from the dead. That's what Easter is all about – we hit that last week.

And this was the turning point for James. He was catapulted into faith and gave his life to serving God by exalting Jesus. And eventually he became the pastor of the church in Jerusalem and wrote this letter to his people, many of whom had been scattered all over Asia by persecution. They were enduring hard times.

And he writes to encourage them and us to make sure we actually have faith that works. He says there are two kinds of people in church, one who believes all the right things but isn't changed by what they believe – these people are deceiving themselves – they think they are Christians but they actually aren't.

But there are other people who, because of what they believe, give themselves to putting Christ first. They are passionate about honouring God with everything they've got. Now they aren't perfect, they still screw up, but to the best of their ability they work to bring glory to Jesus. And these people have faith that works.

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Now James didn't make this up. So in Mark 10 Jesus had a conversation with a young man who wanted to know how to attain eternal life. He believed in God but saw that what Jesus was talking about called for something more than mental assent. And so he asked Jesus "what do I have to do to get eternal life – to be saved?" And Jesus told him "keep the commandments – do something." And the man responded "I have kept them all." So not only did he believe the right things, but he was avoiding sin – honouring his parents, not coveting, not lying, not having any other gods. And then Jesus says:

One thing you lack... Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow Me. (Mark 10:21)

Jesus says faith that works doesn't just believe the right things and live a good life, faith that works is all your chips in the game, everything you've got wagered on this one thing – Jesus is my only ticket to eternity. And that's what the letter of James is all about.

So let's pick up the text in verse 7.

[Read James 5:7-9]

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As we get close to the end of the letter James shifts his attention heavily to the return of Christ. This is the motivation he wants to leave his readers with. James says "The Lord is coming back. His coming is near. Time is running out. Jesus the Judge is standing at the door." And because this is true Christ followers need to keep their foot on the gas and their eyes set on the finish line.

And this is patience. Patience for James means letting your conviction that Jesus is coming back be the primary thought that keeps you going to the end.

And the Apostle Paul agreed that the resurrection and return of Christ is the linchpin of Christianity. In 1 Corinthians we read:

If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. (1 Corinthians 15:19)

So without hope in a coming resurrection for all Christ followers – life beyond the grave, everything in Christianity falls apart. This is central to everything we believe. If the resurrection isn't true Christianity doesn't fall back on being a good way to live a happy and moral life on earth. It becomes the world's worst April fool's joke and it should be abandoned immediately.

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Really? I mean aren't there lots of good ideas in Christianity such that even if it isn't true it would still be good to live your life by what Jesus said?

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The Bible says “not at all.” If Jesus didn’t come back from the dead then the hope He’s coming back for us is shot and the whole system is trash. And that’s because to be a Christ follower requires us to live fully invested in eternity in a way that is foolish if it’s false. You can’t hedge your bets and follow Christ.

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When I was at university I studied World Religions, so Buddhism and Hinduism and Islam and Judaism and Christianity. And I used to tell people Christianity made the most sense of all the religions because if you put the teachings of Christ into practice, then even if Christianity turned out to be wrong you would still fair pretty well. And that’s because if reincarnation turned out to be true then following Jesus’ ideas of loving your neighbour would likely land you a step up. And YHWH might be gracious because we are following the 10 Commandments, and even the Qur’an talks in places about “the people of the book” that’s Jews and Christians, and hints that there may be hope for us,<sup>1</sup> so it seemed to me that Christianity was the safest bet.

The problem with this faulty line of logic – and it is faulty – is that while it *may* hold up in the Baha’i faith where they believe in everything – in Buddha and Jesus and Mohammad – it doesn’t hold up with Jesus. And that’s because Jesus won’t be our safe wager. He won’t be a contingency plan. He will be our God, and accept our whole-hearted worship, or He won’t have anything to do with us at all. You can’t bet on Jesus the way people invest in hedge funds - getting in just deep enough so that if everything else falls apart at least you still have eternal life. James says the only faith in Jesus that works is faith that puts 100% into living in expectation of His promised return. And He is coming back!

So Jesus said:

If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me that you also may be where I am. (John 14:3)

And

Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with Me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done. I am the Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. (Revelation 22:12-13)

These are the words of a man who said He was going to come back from the dead and then pulled it off. And there are all sorts of texts about this throughout the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> Jesus was continually talking about His return.

And so here James wants us to base our actions upon this truth. Jesus said He was coming back.

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<sup>1</sup> For example: Qur’an: Al-Bauara, Ayah 63 “*The fact is that whether it be Muslims, Jews, Christians or Sabians, whoever believes in Allaah and the Last Day and does good deeds, they shall have their reward from their Lord, and there shall be no fear for them, nor shall they grieve.*” (note: there is debate among Muslims as to whether this verse means Jews and Christians might possibly be saved.)

<sup>2</sup> Other texts that talk about Jesus’ return: Mat 24:4-5; 11; 23-27; 30-31; 36-39; 40-44; Mat 25:1-12; 31-46; Mk 8:38; Lk 12:37-40; 17:28-30; 21:34-36; 1 Thess 4:16-17; Rev 1:7-8; 1 Cor 15:52

Now at the bottom of verse 9 we read: “The Judge is standing at the door!” And this might sound like a threat, but while James certainly doesn’t want us to lose sight of faith and get caught up in complaining, really this is a promise for our comfort because the Judge loves us.

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So the other day I was sitting on the couch and all of a sudden I hear this pitiful cry coming out of the kitchen – “Daddy, daddy, come help me!!” And so I trundle over to find Corban hanging over the edge of the counter with his legs dangling about a foot to the left of the stool he had used to climb up there.

The bag of raisons were just too tempting and it seemed like a fail-proof plan, until it came to getting down. And who knows how long he was hanging there attempting to fix the problem before he realized he was doomed without assistance - I need daddy. And so daddy came. I scooped him up and hugged him and helped him down and gave him a couple raisons. (We feed our kids every day, we are great parents.)

But as Christians our hope is similar to Corban’s. Daddy is coming. And when He gets here He is going to make things good. Let me paint you the picture.

In Revelation 21 we read:

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (Revelation 21:1-4)

This is the reality we are looking forward to. Jesus is coming back to make everything new. We are going to meet the King face to face. And we are closer to this now than we were an hour ago.

This means time isn’t cyclical, it’s linear. We are perpetually moving closer to that undisclosed moment when Jesus’ promised return will become reality.

Now we don’t know when that is going to be. Jesus said:

Heaven and earth will pass away... but about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. (Mark 13:31-32)

So when Jesus was on earth even He didn't know when the world was going to end, so that means don't waste your time trying to figure this one out. Yes there are signs that the end is approaching, but the signs are designed to remind us it will happen, not when it will happen. You see if Jesus couldn't figure it out, and didn't think it was important to try, then you aren't going to figure it out either – let it go. But in the very next verse Jesus follows this up by saying:

Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. (Mark 13:33)

So be prepared. But that doesn't mean figure out when the end will happen, it means live now in a way that if the end happens this afternoon you will find yourself on the right side of the equation. And this is what James uses the word "patience" to convey in our text today. And he gives us three illustrations of this.

So first James says "See how the Farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, **patiently** waiting for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be **patient** and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near."

So God is accomplishing something in us as we wait, and it will glorify Him and lead us to joy and it comes out of our patient expectation of His return.

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Now when we think of the word "patience" we usually think of something bad happening to us and us not losing our cool. So when someone cuts you off in traffic and you manage not to wave at him with one finger you slap yourself on the back and say "I'm patient."

But that isn't the kind of patience James is getting at here. It is more the kind of patience a farmer has when they throw their seed in the ground. They do this in faith that something they have no control over is going to happen – rain. And so farmers bury food they could eat in the dirt, and then they wait for the rain to come at some undisclosed point in the future, believing they will get a yield. This is patience... and it is faith that works.

So faith requires action that costs. You have to put your seed in the ground. Now if you aren't a farmer this is crazy, but farmers believe and so they act even though gratification isn't immediate or obvious. They plant in patience.

And James says Christians need to have patience, we need to act today expecting Jesus' return. Doesn't that fit with everything else he has said in this letter?

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Then look at verse 10.

[Read James 5:10-11]

Now this is a pretty interesting illustration because James cites Job as a means of encouraging his readers. And Job is not where most of us usually go for encouragement. I mean the book is 42 chapters long and for the first 36 Job

feels totally deserted in his suffering. Only at the very end does God show up and speak into what he was experiencing, but even then God's words weren't anything Job had expected or hoped for.

So the book starts with God on His throne and the Accuser, who is the devil, walks in. And God asks him what he's been up to. And the devil says "oh, I've been walking around on earth checking people out." And God says "Have you seen my servant Job? He's a good guy" – this is the paraphrased version.

And Satan says "Yup, but don't think he's that great. He praises You because You've made him rich and given him all sorts of good stuff. If You take that stuff away he'll curse You." And God says "Okay Satan. You can take everything from him, but don't kill him." What's up with that?!

And so Satan does. All Job's property gets stolen, his kids die, his health dissipates, all he is left with is a wife who nags him constantly telling him to curse God and die.<sup>3</sup> But Job responds by saying:

Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised. (Job 1:21)

That's the attitude of a righteous person in the middle of suffering... Now this might not sound very encouraging, but get your mind around what is happening here. Satan has to ask permission to give us a hard time. This isn't the way Hollywood paints the struggle in the cosmos is it? Satan's not stealing anything from God, he has to ask. God has him on a chain. He gives him parameters – you can go this far and no farther.

And that's the point of Job. But while we can read this story pretty quickly, it's years in Job's life – and he struggles to maintain his faithfulness for 36 chapters – sometimes he wins, sometimes he loses. But the encouragement of Job is that God is in control and he brings the faithful to a good end. The book of Job ends in joy in spite of the intense difficulty he lives through and even in spite of God's final words "Hey, I let bad things happen, and My reasons for this are My own and way to big for you to fathom. Your job is not to figure things out Job, your job is to believe I'm good because I am, and I don't answer to you."

And this is the promise for Christians, God is faithful. So no matter how much you are suffering – and you haven't had it worse than Job (read the book) – God will make things right in the end. 1000 years from now everything will be in perspective for us and we won't be thinking, oh man I sure got a bum deal on earth. We won't be thinking about that because Jesus will make it right.

And so James says be patient like that. Set your eyes on eternity. Don't look at the circumstances you are facing right now and think this is the end – it isn't.

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<sup>3</sup> Job 2:9

Instead, like the prophets and Job set your mind on heaven. It is in the life to come that the joy of the promised reward will be experienced.

We need this kind of patience because on earth there is no promise that if we are good we will have an easy life. Some people preach this and they call it the “health and wealth gospel” – follow God and you will have health and wealth. But that’s a lie. Think about it, most of the prophets were killed for speaking for God.<sup>4</sup> They lived faithfully and suffered incredibly. Or think of Jesus. No one was ever as faithful as He was, and yet His earthly life didn’t end well did it?

And James tells a bunch of people who were being persecuted “this is the reality.” Following God isn’t going to make your life easy. So you need to patiently set your eyes on what is to come, because that’s how you will attain joy.

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Third James says be patient with each other. Look at verse 12.

[Read James 5:12]

James has talked a lot about the weight of our words. In verse 9 he says don’t grumble against each other, but here he adds something. He says don’t swear. Or don’t use God to get people to believe you.

Now the Jews would do this, they would say “By God, or by heaven, I’ll do whatever it is I said I will do.” The implication was if I don’t then God will deal with me. But James says you don’t need to do this. We aren’t under the Old Testament law which required oaths, we are under the law of liberty and love.

We are people who have experienced the grace and mercy of God and that means we can extend it to our brothers and sisters. So we say “yes” as often as we can when people need help, but when we can’t help we don’t need to swear, we can just say “no, I can’t help you.” Now understandably when we are on the receiving end of this we need patience to endure.

So James says put your faith into action like a farmer planting seed. Don’t live for the moment, instead invest your life into obtaining the treasures of eternity. And don’t lose heart when bad stuff happen to you, instead like Job stand strong in your convictions and wait for the promised reward. There’s going to be joy. And don’t lose heart when your community lets you down. When they aren’t able to help or they say they will and then something happens and they don’t. Don’t lose heart. Keep your eyes on heaven to the end. This is faith that works.

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Now I want to conclude with two practical ideas for how to implement this kind of patient faith into our lives. Here’s the take away:

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<sup>4</sup> Acts 7:52

First, wherever you are at don't put off living for God until you get your life in order. Live for Him now with what you've got.

I had a friend in Korea who had a quick mind for making money in real estate and he told me once "I'm working to have a million dollars in assets, and then once I'm making good money I'll be able to be generous." But this is a faulty idea.

Jesus doesn't need a million dollars. He's not hurting for cash, but He wants our generosity now because He wants to bless us with joining Him in what He's doing. The dollar value of "generous" is irrelevant; it's the heart He wants. So don't put serving Christ on hold until the future gets better. Jesus could come back any moment. Instead ask yourself (or your family as you drive home today): what could we do today to honour God with what we've got?<sup>5</sup>

And second, some of you are tempted to throw in the faith towel right now. You've been in the middle of incredible difficulty with your family or your health or your finances or your own spiritual walk and perhaps you've fallen into believing the lie that if you live in a way that honours God then things will go well. And so you have been doing your best but things aren't getting any better. And you are considering quitting.

James' encouragement for you is to set your sights on Jesus' return. That means think in terms of eternity. And when you do that even the worst situations we find ourselves in can be persevered through. In fact, we can consider them pure joy because enduring them builds our perseverance and this brings us to the joyful end of maturity and completion in Christ.<sup>6</sup> This is what God knows is best for us and is passionate about developing in us.

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The Apostle Paul, who endured all sorts of trials and ended up executed for Christ knew this well; in light of eternity he said:

For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! (2 Corinthians 4:17 NLT)

Seek that glory!

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So brothers and sisters pursuing patience, and even praying for it, isn't a bad idea because Jesus is coming back. Set your minds on this; live today in light of this. And then when the heavens are rolled back like a scroll and we see clearly what until then we have only seen through a glass dimly, Jesus will be able to say "well done good and faithful servant." This is the joy God wants for you, so patiently pursue it. This is faith that works.

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 24:46

<sup>6</sup> James 1:2-4