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PATIENT ENDURANCE

James 5:10-11

By

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James Lesson 21

Patient Endurance James 5:10-11

The late Dr. Albert Schweitzer, famous medical missionary, was once asked what is the best way to raise children. He replied, "There are three ways: by example, by example, and by example."

What he said about child rearing is also true about growing as a believer. We all need examples to follow, especially when we face trials. If the aim of the Christian life is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever, then we *especially* need to glorify and enjoy Him when we encounter trials. That's when the world is watching to see if our faith is genuine. That's when our witness can be the most effective.

John Piper emphasizes that "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him." But when serious trials hit, we are susceptible to Satan's temptation to doubt God's love and goodness towards us. When we see the ungodly prospering and we're suffering, we're tempted, like the psalmist (Ps. 73) to say in our confusion, "Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure" (Ps. 73:13a). But after he gets his proper bearings, he rightly concludes (73:25-26), "Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."

Jonathan Edwards has a wonderful sermon on that text, "God the Best Portion of the Christian." He exclaims (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth], 2:106), "But how great is the happiness of those who have chosen the Fountain of all good, who prefer him before all things in heaven or on earth, and who can never be deprived of him to all eternity!"

When a believer endures severe trials and even faces death with that attitude, God is glorified. In *The Roots of Endurance* ([Crossway Books], p. 28), where he highlights perseverance in the lives of John Newton, Charles Simeon, and William Wilberforce, Piper says, "The aim of all our endurance is that Christ be seen and savored in the world as our glorious God."

The theme of patiently enduring trials runs throughout the Bible. We saw it in our recent study of Hebrews. The author states (10:36), "For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised." He repeatedly exhorts us to hold fast our confession of faith (3:6, 14; 10:23). He wants us to be "imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (6:12). Of Abraham, he stated (6:15), "And so, having patiently waited, he inherited the promise." Hebrews 11 is filled with examples of those who by faith endured hardship and suffering.

This is James' theme here. His readers were suffering, while the ungodly rich were prospering at their expense. As a good teacher, James repeats his earlier theme (1:12), "Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him." In our text, he says,

When you encounter trials, look to the prophets and to Job as examples of patient endurance.

1. When you suffer in your service for the Lord, follow the example of the prophets who patiently endured (5:10).

James points us to the Old Testament prophets (5:10), "As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord." There are three lessons:

A. The Old Testament is given for our instruction—read it!

Once in my church in California, I was referring to the Old Testament story of how the godly King Hezekiah took the Assyrian King Sennacherib's threatening letter and spread it out before the Lord in prayer. As I spoke, it was obvious to me that many were clueless about this story that occurs not just once, but three times in the Old Testament. I stopped and asked for a show of hands to find out how many were not familiar with this story. I was shocked when about a third of the hands went up! I'm still amazed at how many Christians have never read the Old Testament.

In Romans 15:4, Paul states, "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." He repeats the same theme with reference to Israel in the

wilderness (1 Cor. 10:10), “Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.”

This means that knowing history—especially biblical history—is important for your growth in godliness. Jesus assumed that we know biblical history when He said (Matt. 5:11-12), “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” If you are not familiar with the history of the prophets, you will not do well when you suffer any kind of slander or persecution for Jesus’ sake.

I recently read through Jeremiah, who is certainly an example of suffering and patience. I can’t imagine preaching all of your life, as Jeremiah did, with only negative responses to your ministry. It’s hard enough to take occasional negative comments about a sermon, or to see people walk away from your ministry from time to time. When that happens, you tend to question yourself, to make sure that your heart is right before God and that your message is faithful to His Word. But if you only had negative responses, year in and year out, it would be tough to keep going. But Jeremiah kept proclaiming God’s truth.

In addition to the negative responses, Jeremiah also suffered physical persecution. He was beaten, put in the stocks, imprisoned, and thrown into a muddy cistern. He had to contend with false prophets who told the people what they *wanted* to hear, which was directly opposite to Jeremiah’s message that they *needed* to hear. To the very end, Jeremiah’s audience brazenly rejected his message, calling him a liar (see Jer. 42-43)!

Yet in spite of all of these setbacks, as he saw Jerusalem in smoldering ruins, Jeremiah could write the amazing words (Lam. 3:22-24), “The Lord’s lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. ‘The Lord is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘Therefore I have hope in Him.’” Like the psalmist, Jeremiah knew that if God is your portion, you have it all, though you have nothing else. Read the Old Testament and learn patient endurance from the prophets.

B. Church history is given for our instruction—read it!

Someone has said that if you are ignorant of history, you are doomed to repeat its mistakes. Knowing the history of the church and the lives of the great men and women in church history will help you immensely! Overall, I've grown more spiritually through reading Christian biographies than from any other source. I have an article on the church web site, "Mining for Gold," that goes into more detail than I can here, but here are four lessons that I have learned from reading the giants of the past.

**First, Christian biographies have given me a sense of my spiritual heritage.* It helps me to put our times and my own circumstances in perspective. It reminds me of the price that others have paid (often with their blood) to hand the torch of the gospel to me, and that I must hand it off faithfully to the next generation.

**Second, Christian biographies give me great examples to follow.* When I see how faithful men in the past stood firm in the midst of controversy or persecution, how they held firmly to God's Word when under fire, it encourages me to do the same.

**Third, Christian biographies give me theological perspective and balance.* We all tend to be more influenced by our time and culture than we are aware. This was also true of the men from the past, but they were in a different time and culture. So they often help you to see blind spots that you would otherwise miss. Also, when generation after generation of godly men proclaim the same truths, such as the doctrines of God's grace in salvation, you realize that they were all reading the same Book! These truths have strengthened and sustained the saints in every age. Reading their biographies helps me to stand firm when these truths are under fire in our day.

**Fourth, Christian biographies give me an understanding of people and of myself.* I see that even great men of God had their shortcomings and faults, and yet God used them mightily. This is not to excuse my own faults, but it helps me realize that God can and will use me in spite of my imperfections. By reading of some of the mistakes that these great men made, hopefully I can avoid the same. By seeing how they trusted God against overwhelming trials, I'm encouraged to follow their examples. So read the godly examples of the prophets and read Christian biographies!

- C. Serving the Lord does not give us an exemption from trials, especially from the religious crowd.

Somewhere, we've gotten the naïve idea that if we follow the Lord and serve Him, He will protect us from all trials. Read the prophets! They were persecuted precisely *because* they "spoke in the name of the Lord." Often, if they had stopped delivering their unpopular message, they would not have been persecuted. Jeremiah lamented that when he spoke the Lord's words, it resulted in his being mocked and held in derision. Then he added (Jer. 20:9), "But if I say, 'I will not remember Him or speak anymore in His name,' then in my heart it becomes like a burning fire shut up in my bones; and I am weary of holding it in, and I cannot endure it." So he spoke and suffered for it.

John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, spent twelve years in jail because he preached without the required license from the religious authorities. If he had promised to stop preaching, they would have let him out of jail. He had a wife and children, including a blind daughter. He said that when they would leave after visiting him in jail, it was like tearing his flesh from his bones to see them go. But, he refused to promise to stop preaching in order to secure his release.

As with Bunyan and the prophets, if you are faithfully serving the Lord, most of the flak that you catch will come from the religious crowd, not from the world. Jeremiah's main critics and persecutors were the false prophets, who healed the wounds of the people superficially, saying, "peace, peace" when there was no peace (see Jer. 6:14; 8:11). Certainly, the world does oppose the gospel, and you may suffer from the ungodly at work or school. But often the enemy attacks by getting those in the church to attack your motives or to spread false rumors behind your back.

Whenever that happens, check your heart to make sure that there is no truth in their accusations. If you have acted in good conscience before God, then realize that their problem is not really with you, but with God Himself. You just happen to be the messenger, and it's easier to attack you than to admit that they have a controversy with God. So when you suffer in serving the Lord, follow the example of the prophets who patiently endured.

2. When you face trials for no apparent reason, consider Job and trust in God's compassion and mercy (5:11).

Verse 11 should read, "*Behold*, we count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful." (The updated NASB omits "behold," which calls attention to what follows.) Think about Job's story often!

Job was a blameless and upright man, who feared God and turned away from evil (Job 1:1). To be blameless did not imply perfection, but that he was a man of integrity. Job was also very rich, with large herds of sheep, camels, oxen, and donkeys, along with many servants. He had seven sons and three daughters.

Satan appeared before God and God brought up Job as an example of an upright man. Satan responded that Job only trusted God because He had blessed and protected him. So to prove that Job was not upright just for the benefits, God gave Satan permission to do whatever he chose, as long as he didn't lay a hand on Job himself. Satan went out and deprived Job of all his possessions. Worst of all, he sent a powerful wind that knocked down the house where Job's children were gathered, killing all ten of them.

Job's remarkable response was to fall before God in worship, saying (Job 1:21b), "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." The author adds (Job 1:22), "Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God."

Satan returned to God and gained permission to go farther, as long as he spared Job's life. So he smote him with painful boils from head to toe. At this point, Job's poor wife had had enough. She advised him to curse God and die. But Job responded (2:10), "You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?" Again the author adds, "In all this Job did not sin with his lips."

Then Job's three "friends" show up, supposedly to comfort him. The rest of the book chronicles their misguided arguments that the reason for his suffering was some hidden sin in his life. Job defended himself, demanding an audience with God, who seemed to be hiding Himself. After a fourth friend appears and corrects the first three, as well as confronts Job, God does appear. He calls Job

to account by running through a description of His mighty power in creation. After Job properly repents, God graciously restores Job's health and his fortune, and He gives him ten more children. God blessed Job's latter days more than the early days, allowing him to live to see his grandchildren to the fourth generation.

There are five lessons here that I can only touch on:

- A. God's blessing is on those who endure, not on those who bail out.

The Bible puts a huge emphasis on the need for endurance through trials. Paul assured the Colossians that although they were formerly God's enemies, now they were reconciled to Him. Then he added (Col. 1:23), "if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel..." The author of Hebrews said (3:14), "For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end." There are many other such texts.

You may wonder, "Why would we count those blessed who endured, if all that they experienced was suffering, persecution, and a martyr's death?" As we saw last week, the biblical answer is, "Because they are enjoying eternal rewards in heaven that are beyond human description!" If God's promises for heavenly reward are not true, then we would be fools to suffer for Christ (1 Cor. 15:19).

- B. Endurance does not imply perfection, but it does require submission.

James does not mention Job's *patience* (as in the KJV), but rather, his *endurance*. Many have pointed out that Job was not always patient in his trials, but he did endure. God graciously brought him through and rewarded him in the end in spite of his struggles and shortcomings. If Job had handled it all perfectly, none of us could have related to him. His very human struggles encourage us to submit to God's dealings and to trust Him, even when our emotions are all over the chart.

- C. The submission required for endurance is bound up with a firm belief in God's sovereignty over all things.

James refers to "the Lord's dealings" with Job. Although it was Satan who worked behind the scenes to take Job's property

and to kill his children, Job affirmed that it was God: “the Lord has taken away” (Job 1:21); “Shall we accept good from God and not accept adversity?” (Job 2:10). John Bunyan, commenting on 1 Peter 4:19 (“Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right”) said, “God has appointed who shall suffer. Suffering comes not by chance or by the will of man, but by the will and appointment of God” (cited in John Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God* [Crossway Books], p. 30). If you deny or ignore this truth, as many do, you destroy the foundation for endurance in trials.

D. God’s sovereignty over all things implies that He has a purpose that He is accomplishing.

This is why James says, “you ... have seen the outcome of the Lord’s dealings....” We can read the end of the story and see that God had a purpose in Job’s sufferings. If Job had never suffered, his ministry in our lives and in the lives of countless generations would not exist. But because of what Job went through, millions of saints have gained strength through their sufferings. I have heard modern Christian counselors, who must be wiser than the Bible, say that it is insensitive to mention Romans 8:28 to those who are going through suffering. But why was that verse written, if not to give hope to those who suffer? It affirms that God will accomplish His sovereign purpose for good through our suffering: “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”

E. No matter how difficult our trials, we must never doubt God’s goodness or love in His sovereign purpose.

Charles Spurgeon, who suffered greatly, begins a sermon on this verse by saying, “We are far too apt to entertain hard thoughts of God” (“The Pitifulness of the Lord and the Comfort of the Afflicted” [Ages Software]). James says, “the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful.” If that is the lesson from Job’s sufferings, then it certainly applies to our lesser sufferings. Against our feelings and against the temptations of the devil, we must affirm by faith, as the psalmist did (Ps. 119:68), “You are good and do good.” And (Ps. 119:71), “It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes.” The Puritan Stephen Charnock, who spends 150 pages expounding on God’s goodness in his classic, *The Existence*

and Attributes of God [Baker], says (2:224), "He can no more act contrary to this goodness in any of his actions, than he can un-God himself."

One of Satan's earliest ploys was to get Adam and Eve to doubt God's goodness toward them (Gen. 3:1, 5). He still uses that bait when we go through trials. One reason that we fall prey to doubting God's goodness is that we think too highly of ourselves and too lowly of God. We mistakenly think that God owes us something good because we deserve it. But even Job, whom God described as the most godly man on earth, did not suffer unjustly in all that he went through. As Charnock wrote (2:212), "God owes nothing to the holiest creature; what he gives is a present from his bounty, not the reward of the creature's merit." Or, as Paul asks rhetorically (Rom. 11:35), "Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again?" God does not owe us anything but judgment. Any blessings that we enjoy are sheer grace!

Conclusion

If I had time I would tell you of some of the men who have suffered greatly, but have patiently endured by looking to the Lord. William Carey endured hardship and many setbacks, but he endured in the overwhelming task of taking the gospel to India's lost millions. Adoniram Judson lost wives and children, was imprisoned on false charges and tortured, and saw very little response to the gospel in Burma, yet he persevered. I could add David Livingstone, Charles Simeon, John Bunyan, Charles Spurgeon, John Calvin, and many others who suffered greatly, yet patiently endured.

My main aim in this message is to get you to read your Old Testament over and over and contemplate the lives of the prophets and Job. Read the biographies of the faithful saints in church history. (I have a bibliography of Christian biographies on the church web site under "Helpful Resources.") If you're currently suffering, look to the prophets and look to Job as examples of patient endurance. Trust in the compassionate and merciful Lord.

Application Questions

1. Is the Bible sufficient to help believers endure terrible trials? If so, why do we turn to modern psychology for help?
2. Is it wrong to shed tears or to cry out to God for answers when we suffer? Is there a right and wrong way to do this?
3. Why doesn't God protect those who are serving Him from trials and persecution? What purposes does He accomplish through these hardships?
4. Some ("Open Theism") argue that God does not cause or control our trials. Why is this devastating to faith and hope?

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