

27. The Church Called to Patience

Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

(James 5:7-9)

The Church is Called to Patience

In the previous chapter, we noted how James writes in no uncertain terms about the excesses and abuses of the rich. He employs strong language and takes an uncompromising stand. The rich are headed for extreme misery. Those who oppress the poor will not get away with their crimes.

But notice how James' tone immediately changes when he returns to addressing the members of the congregation: "Be patient, then, brothers" (5:7). In 5:9, we read, "Don't grumble against each other, brothers," and so it continues throughout the remainder of the chapter. James' admonitions are not less intense, but they are certainly placed in a more brotherly light. We can see that James is a discerning pastor.

In 5:1-6, using very potent language, James admonishes the uncaring rich and tells them that God's judgment over them is surely coming. In the following verses, however, he addresses the members of the congregation. The line of his message to them is to show patience. This is important, for James' scathing indictment of the rich should not lead the members of the congregation to hasty, rebellious action. They must be patient and await the coming of the Lord to whom alone belongs vengeance.

The passage we focus on now also demonstrates how the early Christian church longed ardently for the coming of the Lord Jesus, but did not necessarily expect it to happen in their own lifetime. Much patience was required and a strong prayer life had to be established. The matter of perseverance

comes to the fore. Peter later deals with this in his letters as well, especially his second letter.

As difficult as the circumstances may be or become, James says that Christians should not take the law into their own hands, give up on the Lord, or become divided among each other. Rather, they must preserve the unity among the communion of saints. The church is called to patience in the knowledge that Christ's coming is imminent. This patience is an act of hope, an act of faith, and an act of love.

Endless Patience?

James writes in 5:7, "Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming." This refers to what he stated earlier regarding the great judgment that will come over the uncaring rich. The Lord Jesus Christ will deal with them, and the churches need not worry about that. The rich will not get away with their crimes, for God will most certainly bring them into judgment.

Now this was fine for James to point out, but what were the church members to do in the meantime when they had to face these people and deal with them sometimes on a day-to-day basis? When the situation is hopeless, people act in desperation. Have we not all acted out of frustration and desperation at one time or another?

Generally speaking, we can say that patience is not one of our strongest virtues. We might perhaps be patient with those who are close to us, our children and relatives, but patience in general is lost in our society. Instead of patience, rage often comes to the fore. We have all heard of road rage, airplane rage, and crowd rage. Remember Quebec City, 2001, when police set up barricades and had everything planned, yet the hordes broke through in three minutes.

James may have been exhorting the church members to be patient, but how could they be patient when their children were dying of hunger and they had just been told again that they would not be paid for their week's work? Would they not lose their sorely-tried patience?

How can James write this? Is it realistic? Under normal circumstances, we are patient, but there are times when we simply lose our cool. The text, however, does not say that we must be patient in general. It says instead that we must be patient "until the Lord's coming." There is a limit to what we can bear and endure. There must be justice one day, and there *will* be justice when the

Lord comes. Until then, we must be patient, for the LORD has said, “Vengeance is mine!”

An Act of Hope

God does not ask of us an endless patience, so that sin can go on unpunished forever. Not at all. He asks us to be patient only until he comes. Christian patience is always directed to the imminent coming of the Lord Jesus. It is not a resignation in desperation. We do not say, “Oh well, such is life, and we cannot change it anyway,” for Christian patience is an act of hope.

We recognize the words “faith, hope, and love” as the threesome from I Corinthians 13:13. I do not have them in the same order in my treatment of this passage, but that is not pertinent. What we need in times of trial, for the maturity of faith, is hope.

We know that hope is not a feeling or an expectation that things might perhaps turn for the better. That would be a foolish hope, not based on reality whatsoever. Hope must be based on something, however, and our basis is the promise of the Lord Jesus Christ that he is coming back to judge the living and the dead. This hope is based on his very word and promise. Christ has said that he will return, and we hope in that, put our trust in that, build our dreams on that, and base our expectations on that.

The phrase, “Be patient, then, brothers,” is not some kind of advice. James is not saying, “Brothers, take it easy or it will get even worse.” No, James is telling his readers that being patient means to hope in the LORD, to trust in him. When he comes, he will perform justice. He will remove all his and our enemies. Being patient means that we look forward and upward, even when everything around us is shutting down and our own life is being taken from us. We have hope because the Lord Jesus promised us the new heaven and the new earth. Therefore we can wait and work, and, if need be, suffer and die.

The word “patience” is easily misunderstood because we tend to associate it with a patient lying in bed doing nothing. In the context of James, however, patience does not mean lying or sitting around. Instead, it means to bear something, to lift up a burden and carry it. The word “patience”, as used here, is not a passive word but an action word. “I will lift up this burden and carry it, because I have hope in the Lord!”

James uses the example of a farmer working in his field. He has plowed, harrowed, cultivated, and even seeded the field. Now he must wait for the rain. He has done what he can, and now the outcome is out of his hands and in the Lord’s hand. He must wait for the spring rains to get the process of germination started.

He must also wait for the autumn rains to get the crops ready for harvest. Once the seed is in the ground, it is in God's hand from start to finish. The farmer can only be patient.

An Act of Faith

I also call Christian patience an act of faith. James writes in 5:8, "You too, be patient and stand firm." Here he is again referring to the trials that the original readers of his letter had to endure at the hands of their heartless and cruel rich masters.

Be patient. Hope in God. Stand firm. Here it means to stand firm in the faith. We should not lose faith, for in the process we would also lose everything else. This patience, this Christian hope, is built on faith. We do not build on conjectures or dreams, but on the promises of God, for faith has everything to do with his sure promises. We believe that God will do what he has promised to do. That is our faith.

We all know the definition of faith, given by the *Heidelberg Catechism* (Lord's Day 7). It is "a sure knowledge": I know that God will do what he has said in his Word. It is also "a firm confidence": he will save also me, a promise which I should never doubt. In the minds of God's people, there must be no doubt whatsoever as to the outcome of the struggle. We shall prevail against all the attacks of Satan and all the cruelty of men because we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. He alone is our strength.

James therefore adds the call to stand firm. Literally, he adds, "strengthen your hearts." James says that we must have courage deep inside, because it is this type of courage that makes us stand firm. We are to be like a line of soldiers facing the enemy, and James is the captain who calls out as the enemy approaches, "Stand firm, be strong now!"

In order to stand firm, we must have faith. Faith is the evidence of things not seen. It may look like we are going under, but our faith says that we are not. Nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord," wrote Paul to the Romans (Rom 8:38-39). We will face whatever we must and we will stand firm and hold the line, for it is the Lord who has given us rich promises that he will fulfill.

Sometimes people ask, "How can you be so patient? How can you bear all the things that come your way?" What can we answer to such queries? "The

hope of faith shall not deceive us, for Jesus' faithfulness endures." We cannot point to ourselves, but to the Lord Jesus Christ.

The maturity of faith becomes especially evident when we are being pressured and must hold the line of faith and hope. This does not mean that we are always calm, cool, and collected. We experience good and bad days, like every human being under stress, but the dominant tone of our life is one of hope and faith.

The Lord's Coming is Near

This hope and faith directs itself to the Lord's coming. James writes, "Stand firm (meaning strengthen your heart) because the Lord's coming is near." What does he mean? Must we conclude here that James and the early Christian church expected the Lord to return shortly, even in their own lifetime? We previously touched on that, when we dealt with what James wrote about the coming of the Lord in 5:7. He did not use the word "near" at that point, but said, "Be patient...until the Lord's coming." Now he writes that the Lord's coming is *near*.

We also read in other parts of the New Testament that the Lord's coming is near. I think immediately of Romans 13:11-12: "Our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here." I think also of the book of Revelation, where we repeatedly read, "I am coming soon." Paul also writes to the Corinthians about eagerly awaiting the day of our Lord. Was there a sense among the early Christians that the Lord would come back in their lifetime? Think of how rumors were flying around in the church at Thessalonica that the day of the Lord had already come, rumors that Paul had to deal with rather strongly.

When we read that the Lord's coming is near, we must understand this to mean simply that we now live in the last or latter days. This is the final phase of history. The clock cannot be turned back, but it is moving forward steadily, ever closer to the return of Christ. Never before have we been so close. Peter writes in his second letter that the only reason the Lord has not yet returned is that the church must first be completely gathered. It is God's forbearance and will to gather his church that holds Christ back from the day of glory. In terms of the totality of history and the character of the last dispensation, however, we can indeed say that the Lord's coming is near.

Christ's coming is imminent. That is the period of history in which we live. All major events have taken place: Christ's incarnation, his death and

resurrection, his ascension, and Pentecost all lie behind us. The fullness of time has come, and we now await the perfection of time.

That is why the theme of maturity is so strong in James' letter. Knowing what we know and being where we are in time, we, of all people, should be mature in the faith, well-equipped by the Spirit of Christ to handle whatever comes our way in the form of trial or temptation. That is James' theme, and it comes out also in the text presently under consideration. We should not lose our hope, but stand firm in the faith, for we do have a living Savior in heaven who has redeemed us, who has made a place for us in the Father's house, and who is coming to judge the living and the dead.

Let us realize that we do live in the latter days. Things are now coming to their final manifestation. Evil will show itself in its most gruesome form. God's judgment that leads up to the final judgment will come over the earth in increasingly heavy measure. Now we must stand firm and stand together in the faith. Now the love of Christ for us must be clearly functioning among us.

An Act of Love

We all know that there are three things that remain, and we have already discussed faith and hope. The one we have not yet mentioned is love, but does James himself even mention it in 5:7-9? A preacher may not simply import a passage from elsewhere and place it conveniently in the text with which he is dealing. That is called "faulty exegesis", or wrong interpretation.

Faulty exegesis is always a danger. But consider the words of 5:9: "Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged." The word that is translated as "grumbling" literally means sighing against each other. It implies being envious of the other person, sighing in envy, and perhaps even vocalizing this envy, hence, grumbling (as the NIV translation reads).

Grumbling means that we are not happy with what we have, nor are we happy for others in the congregation for what they have received. We are self-directed: "I do not have this or that, while the others do."

Envy can only exist where there is no love. How can we love someone if we are envious of them? If we love someone, we are happy for them that they have so many blessings. We share in their joy. We are also grateful for what we ourselves have. Then there should be no grumbling that we do not have this or that. Then we should not look at our neighbor and say, "It must be nice to have all those things that he has, and that I don't have."

When there is this type of envy in the church, we are all like immature children. The maturity of faith is gone. We do not treat one another kindly

anymore, love is not expressed, and Satan has succeeded in dividing the congregation and planting bitterness among the members.

How can we stand together as church if there is no love? For the sake of material gain, we will easily betray one another. Envy will rot the church from the inside, and that is a greater problem than any attack from the outside. In the church, there must be patience without partiality that shows itself in the act of love.

Judgment on Grumbling

When people really care about one another, they are also patient with each other. Love leads to patience. If there is no love, however, patience fails and we become envious, angry, and even hateful of others. We isolate ourselves from others.

The Lord takes grumbling very seriously. James writes, “Don’t grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged.” When there are times of stress for the church and some have it better than others, we must not grumble against those who have it better, for God does not allow it. “You will be judged,” writes James.

Speaking about judgment, James reminds us that “the Judge is standing at the door!” Here we again feel the sense of urgency that James conveys in the whole letter. We tend to think that judgment is still far off, and will go past the door. But the Judge is standing at *our* door and he is about to enter in.

The Lord hates grumbling. Israel was severely punished for it under the old dispensation. Will God then allow it in the new and final dispensation? Note that James says we must not grumble against each other. He is not talking about grumbling against the Lord, as Israel did so often, but about grumbling against each other. If we do so, then we help to destroy the unity of the church and become prey for Satan. Dissatisfied people are a prime target for the devil, and he knows exactly where our weakness is. But the Judge calls this particular weakness, sin.

The immediate presence and the imminent coming of the Judge—who is here our Lord Jesus Christ—make clear that judgment begins first at the house of God. As Peter writes in his first letter, we must love one another deeply from the heart, and love the brotherhood of believers. In the local churches and in the larger brotherhood, we must show love for one another.

Grumbling means that we feel slighted, that our brothers and sisters in the Lord have more. “God gave me a raw deal!” And so we begin to hate the others. We cut ourselves loose from the others, perhaps even with pious talk. But

the Judge is standing at the door. Patience is an act of love, and whoever does not show it has no lasting place in the church of Christ.

Christ the Judge, however, is Christ our Savior. He showed endless patience. He never gave up hope, not even in the agony of hell on the cross. He never lost the faith. He did all things with boundless love. Did we ever hear him grumble? Did he ever say, "Why is this happening to me?" Did he ever reject the brotherhood because he felt he was not appreciated?

During his deepest moments of rejection, Christ showed the fullness of perfect love. Now we know the way we must go towards the maturity of faith. And when the Judge stands at our door, we do not have to run and hide, but we may joyfully open the door in faith and hope and say, "Come in, welcome to our house."