

“Count it all joy, my brethren, when ye fall into divers temptations; knowing this: that the trying of your faith worketh patience. And let patience have her perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.”

As we conclude our series in the book of James, I’d like to remind you where we started. An exhortation unto joy: a joy that comes from knowing that trials work unto patience, patience works unto perfection, and perfection works unto total fulfillment.

And as James has encouraged his brothers and sisters throughout this book, patience has been a particularly prominent theme: “be slow to speak, slow to anger; bridle the tongue; be slow to show judgment, quick to show mercy; show meekness in wisdom, not arrogance in pride; humble yourself in a prideful world; deliberate and pray in your speculation; do what is right, not whatever it takes to win.” The conscious effort to abstain from partiality requires patience; equal justice and treatment under the law requires patience; to show partiality is judicial, political, or moral expediency.

So James has given us much to work with in the exercise of our patience. The boastful rich – those who idolize wealth and worldly expediency – will have their just deserts, he just got done telling us at the beginning of chapter 5. So therefore, brothers and sisters, just be patient.

Don’t mistake this patience, though, for passivity or laziness. Patience is not sitting around doing nothing. In fact, the words James uses for patience and longsuffering are also synonyms and translated in other places as “endurance”. Patience is **HARD WORK!**

We tend to think that patience is a virtue exercised while waiting for the water to boil in a pot, or waiting for the microwave to countdown to zero, standing in front of it, watching the numbers on the display, watching the bubbles start to form on the bottom of the pot. Or perhaps we tell our children to “be patient” as they ask “can we have dessert?” for the third time, implying to them: “stand by; hold your horses; stop moving.”

In the military, our exercise in patience was exemplified in the common phrase: “hurry up and wait,” in which we would make deliberate haste to arrive at our destination early – “to be early is to be on time, to be on time is to be late” was the refrain – we would arrive early on purpose, only to stand around with **NOTHING** to do for maybe an hour.

This is not the patience James has been encouraging since James 1. Up front in James 1 he says the opposite, “let patience have her perfect work, that you may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.”

The farmer, James says, is patient; but the farmer is not lazy. He waits for the precious fruit of the earth, yes; he is patient about it; he waits for the rain and waits for the harvest. But for those that know anything about farming, waiting for the rain and the harvest requires hard work. I’ve mentioned the orange grove I grew up in in the past; there was an annual cycle of work associated with that grove: pruning, weeding, de-

bugging, irrigating, repelling varmints that would chew the hoses; fixing the hoses that varmints would chew; and in cold winters, setting up what are called “smudge pots” throughout the orchard, which are basically portable stoves with a chimney, literally to burn oil so the frost wouldn’t ruin the harvest. In the winter of 1990, the San Joaquin Valley where I grew up endured a devastating two-week freeze. It caused over \$5 billion dollars in agricultural damage, and destroyed 200,000 acres of crops, our 12 acres of oranges among them.¹ All our efforts that year, to include the bone-numbing task of hauling “smudge pots” in the middle of the night, could not save our crop.

But we were patient. Even though we lost our crop, we were patient, nurturing the trees back to health with great care, enduring in our labors in the next annual cycle, looking forward to the rains and the harvest the following winter.

So as we work unto perfection, we toilers and laborers of the field, freezing though it may be from time to time, be patient: the consummate harvest awaits you: the consummate firstfruit is coming. The coming of the LORD is at hand! The prophets labored in the name of the Lord, for the repentance and righteousness of Israel, awaiting the coming Messiah; let us likewise labor in the name of the Lord with good works – for the repentance and righteousness of the church, awaiting in trials, tribulations, and the realities of this fallen world for the second coming of Christ!

In light of this, our worldly strife and partiality should seem so trivial, especially among brothers and sisters. When we remember the glory of the Lord in his the nativity, his transfiguration, and his resurrection and ascension,² we should likewise be anticipating the great glory and power of the Lord in his second coming. What Joy is this! That at the second coming of the Lord we will be perfect and entire wanting nothing, because we will have everything: eternity with Christ.

So do not grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, but in the hard work of patience, await the harvest of eternal glory in Christ Jesus together. Work unto communion with one another with this common goal; work unto trust and fellowship with one another united in Christ; work unto a relationship with one another that, above all, glorifies God in humility – that does resort to idolatry by placing things created in the place of the creator. When we swear by the witness of the earth, or by our mother’s grave, or on our children’s’ lives, what you are doing is placing that witness as the supreme judge of the occasion.

¹ For economic damage, see Homeland Security Digital Library, “1990 California Freeze,” <https://www.hsdl.org/c/tl/1990-california-freeze/> (accessed December 3, 2021). For more details on how this affected people and livelihoods, see Seth Mydans, “Cold Devastates California Crops; Fruit Prices Across Nation to Rise” in *New York Times*, December 28, 1990, Section A1. <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/12/28/us/cold-devastates-california-crops-fruit-prices-across-nation-to-rise.html> (Accessed December 3, 2021)

² Luke 2:9; Luke 9:32; Luke 24

James concludes this part of his epistle by appealing to the words of Christ himself on the sermon on the mount: “Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply ‘yes’ or ‘no’; anything more than this comes from evil.”³

This allusion to the words of Christ is more than a reminder of what Jesus said concerning the danger of idolatry in words: it’s a reminder to speak and do to one another as Christ has loved us. Remember Christ’s promises to us; rest in the joy of those promises and put your faith in them. Do not swear by or put your faith in the things of this world. Trust in the almighty king of the universe and await the promise of his coming.

Verse 12 seems to conclude James’s formal epistle. What follows seems almost like a postscript, but it’s rich with encouragement unto faith, good words, good works, and of course, the joy of Christ.

While we await the eternal harvest we will undergo suffering. What did Christ do in his agony? He prayed. In the garden of Gethsemane, he told his disciples, “Pray that you may not enter into temptation.” We read that Christ, being in agony, he prayed even more earnestly.⁴

Are any of you cheerful? Let him sing praise! Prior to the Gethsemane prayer Jesus and his disciples concluded Passover with a hymn,⁵ which in the Jewish tradition would have been Psalms 115 through 118. These hymns of praise steer a cheerful heart unto even more joy, singing the inspired reality that the Lord is our God, he is our strength and song, his steadfast love endures forever,⁶ he preserves the humble, is merciful, gracious, and righteous,⁷ our shield and our help, remembering and blessing us.⁸ Even the shortest Psalm, 117, is rich with thanksgiving and praise: “Praise the Lord, all nations! Extol him, all peoples! For great is his steadfast love toward us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever! Praise the Lord!”

James offers you good advice to sing these Psalms in your joy, and bring others unto joy as you sing them!

³ Matthew 5

⁴ Luke 22:39-46

⁵ Mark 14:26

⁶ Psalm 118, throughout

⁷ Psalm 116:5-6

⁸ Psalm 115:11-2

Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up.

Now, I want to pause on this verse because it has been abused in idolatrous ways that elevate the actions of man above the providence of God. A “prosperity gospel” might take this verse, for example, and use it to justify a sprinkling of oil and an incantation that will obligate God to heal a broken leg, or cure a person’s cancer.

How can anyone say such a thing about James when he has been adamant throughout his epistle in warning against the idolatry of elevating the words of man above the will of God? Just last week we heard James exhort us to pray, “if the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” But speculating on the confidence of men and their actions? “In this, you boast in arrogance, and all such boasting is evil!”

So James is not prescribing a formula that will obligate God unto an outcome. Then what is he doing? Very quickly, I’ll show three reasons for this exhortation: the physical reason, the symbolic reason, and the ceremonial or consecrating reason.

The physical reason is that anointing oils have healing properties. They have been used as medicine for thousands of years. Usually based in some sort of olive oil and spiked with herbs and other spices to give off a fragrant aroma, soothe pain, and heal sores. Psalm 133 tells us the joy of dwelling together in unity as brothers and sisters is like the precious oil poured over the head, running down on the beard, running down on the collar of his robe. This may seem “unscientific” to our modern medicinal minds, but we don’t even have to venture into the properties of essential oils to know that petroleum jelly – made from oil – is used liberally to treat a wide number of medical conditions. But at a much cheaper cost than 1st Century Anointing oil.

Which is the symbolic point here: anointing oil was not cheap. If you recall the story of Mary anointing Jesus, the disciples complained that the oil was worth 300 denarii. Now, if one denarius was worth a days’ wages, that works out to about a year’s worth of work: which, for illustration purposes only, at the standard 2,080 working hours per year at \$15 per hour, that would work out to the oil being worth more than \$30,000. The anointing oil in our Old Testament reading of Exodus 30 was even more expensive: at 1,500 shekels, that might work out to a modern equivalent of approximately \$500,000 worth of anointing oil.

James telling the elders to anoint the sick with oil is not a small expense. The language does not imply a few drops; no it implies a thorough smearing of oil,⁹ a very liberal use of a very expensive commodity. We shouldn’t skimp on our care of the sick, but use even our expensive oil in support of one another’s ailments.

⁹ See BDAG at ἀλείφω, cf with Liddell & Scott at the same. Ancient connotations include the application of oil in preparation for athletic competition.

Finally, there is a consecrative aspect to the anointing. Whatever else this oil might do, it is a reminder that we are consecrated, set apart unto holiness,¹⁰ just as we saw the priests and the instruments in the temple in Exodus 30. It is a reminder that we are not the world's, but we are God's. We speculate in worldly affairs, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that,” but we know for a fact that that he is our eternal shield and help (Psalm 115); he is gracious, merciful, and righteous, preserving the simple, and saving the humble (Psalm 116); and that the faithfulness and steadfast love of the Lord endures forever (Psalm 117 & 118).

So similarly, the prayer in faith for healing and recovery is a good thing; but the prayer of faith in Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory, is and has been effective to heal the sickness of sin, raising us up from our estate of sin and misery unto a state of salvation by the Redeemer, forgiving our sins and giving us his righteousness.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, pray unto good works: like confessing your sins to one another as part of your sanctification and healing. Pray for healing; pray for revival and a bountiful harvest of souls that would make Christ's kingdom reach every corner of the earth. The fervent prayers of Elijah brought forth rain; and brought forth a harvest; But during the drought, Elijah was praying AND hard at work in his patience, urging Israel unto repentance and righteousness.

So, likewise, in your prayer: use it for great working: proclaiming the gospel to those who have not heard, but also, taking care of each other; keeping each other from wandering, straying from the truth; saving that brother and sister from a multitude of sins, even from death itself.

In the past two years, we've seen the normalization of home worship, through which many churches have regrettably lost members, who started by watching church service online, but soon abandoned even that in favor of convenience, or even deliberate sin. I praise God for our faithful online worshippers, and for the technology that enables their participation. But if there are some who are wandering, let me close this epistle as James does by exhorting one another unto the joy of communion with one another, being reminded of the Joy brought unto the world in our savior Jesus Christ, whose love extends even to the wanderer, and whose righteousness extends far as the curse is found.

Prayer

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. (Romans 15:13)

¹⁰ John 17:19