

The Letter of James

Faith that works!

Study 10 – Patient Endurance

Introduction

‘Patience is a virtue’ – or so the saying goes. Easy to say, but not so easy to do, especially when one is facing difficult times and just longing for things to change. And yet as James makes crystal clear in our passage (James 5:7-12), patience is a key aspect of authentic discipleship, something which he considers to be of great importance for his readers.

Nor should we be surprised that James places such a high value on patience and chooses to end his letter with teaching about patience and perseverance. For, as we have already seen, the context into which James wrote was one in which believers were facing trials of many kinds and therefore one in which their faith was being put to the test. In such a context perseverance would have been of the utmost importance (1:3,4), a hallmark of a true and living faith (*cf* 2:14-26). And, as our text for this study shows, the foundation of such perseverance is to be found in a godly patience.

One unexpected and striking feature of James 5:7-12 is the fact that James links his call for patience with a clear warning against grumbling and oath taking (5:9,12). What are we to make of such warnings? It is hard to be too dogmatic about what James might have had in his mind when he included these warnings, but we do know from the account of Israel’s journey through the wilderness that testing can easily result in grumbling (see Exodus 16 & 17; *cf* 1 Corinthians 10:1-13) and that such grumbling is in fact an indication of an unbelieving heart (*cf* Hebrews 3:7-19). And James was certainly concerned that his readers should have true faith and an undivided heart before the Lord.

When it comes to oath taking (5:12), the connection is not that easy to see, so much so that commentators either take the verse on its own as yet another example of wise and godly speech (as e.g. in 1:19 or 3:1-12) or link it to the passage that follows in 5:13-20. In my opinion, the prohibition on oath taking does fit within the context of patience and perseverance in the face of trials if we understand James to be warning his readers not to make ‘rash’ promises, either to God or to others or to make boastful statements about how they will overcome their hardships. In the first case such rash promises may well be a way of seeking to get out of the difficulty (Lord if you ... then I will...) rather than patiently allowing perseverance to finish its work (1:4); in the latter they may just be an expression of self-sufficient pride and boastfulness (4:16), the very attitude before God that trials are meant to correct (4:6,7).

Read James 5:7-12



Investigate

1. What two things does James want his readers to do in the face of various kinds of trials? (5:7, 10-11).
2. How are these two things linked to each other?
3. The phrase 'stand firm' in 5:8 is literally 'strengthen your heart'. How does this exhortation tie in with James' call to patience and perseverance?
4. What three examples of patience in the midst of difficulties does James give?
5. What is the point that he is making in each of these examples?

Apply



In what way has this passage challenged your thinking?



In what way has this passage spoken to your heart and exposed hidden sins?



What needs to change in your daily life as a result of this passage?