

Until The Lord's Coming

James 5:7-11

Stretching through the flat central plains of the United States is an area 460 miles long and 400 miles wide known as “Tornado Alley.” Though tornadoes can occur anywhere on the face of the earth, as many as 300 tornadoes touch down in Tornado Alley every year, more than any other place on the planet.

On the afternoon of June 22, 1928, a Kansas farmer by the name of Will Keller was working in his fields when he saw a tornado approaching. As he gathered his family into the cyclone cellar, and grabbed the door to close it, he turned to look at the monster funnel cloud. He saw that the lower end which had been on the ground was beginning to rise, and he knew that he was safe. But listen to his words as he described what he saw:

“Steadily the tornado came on, the end gradually rising above the ground. I could have stood there only a few seconds but so impressed was I with what was going on that it seemed a long time. At last the great shaggy end of the funnel hung directly overhead. Everything was still as death. There was a strong gassy odor and it seemed that I could not breathe. There was a screaming, hissing sound coming directly from the end of the funnel.

“I looked up and to my astonishment I saw right into the heart of the tornado. There was a circular opening in the center of the funnel, about 50 or 100 feet in diameter, and extending straight up for a distance of at least one-half mile, as best I could judge under the circumstances.

“The walls of this opening were of rotating clouds and the whole was made brilliantly visible by constant flashes of lightning which zigzagged from side to side. Around the lower rim of the great vortex small tornadoes were constantly forming and breaking away. These looked like tails as they writhed their way around the end of the funnel. It was these that made the hissing noise. I noticed that the direction and rotation of the great whirl was anticlockwise, but the small twisters rotated both ways—some one way and some another.” (*Planet Earth: Storm*, A.B. C. Whipple, *Time-Life Books*, 1982, p. 132)

Will Keller was one of only a few human beings to look into the very eye of a tornado and live to tell about it. It must have been a terrifying experience. But as children of God, we find that there are other “tornadoes” which come roaring across our lives, and we are looking right into the “eye” of them.

The persecution of Christians in this country has already begun in much more subtle ways, and will probably grow much worse before Jesus returns. The enemies of the Christ-life are growing stronger and more aggressive with each day that passes. Our government is enacting policies and passing legislation, and our President is issuing mandates, which either drastically infringe on our freedom, or attempt to force us into lifestyles which are definitely anti-Christ. The time may arrive soon when being obedient to our Heavenly Father will mean that we must deliberately disobey our government, or pay heavy penalties.

The more this happens in our own country, the more we Christians should long for the day when Christ returns.

When James wrote his letter, he addressed a very similar situation. The Christians of his day were experiencing a great deal of persecution, and he knew it would probably grow worse. So, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, he wrote some words of encouragement to those who were undergoing great suffering because of their relationship to Christ. Let’s read this passage:

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In these words, we are able to discover some resources, some “anchors,” for the storm which may break out upon Christians in our country in a short while. These take the form of things we can do, while staring into the eyes of the tornado of persecution, until the Lord returns.

1 Be patient, vv. 7-8a

The first thing James told his readers was that, while they were in the midst of suffering for their faith, they needed to be patient. Patience was all the more important since they were in a waiting time, until the day Jesus came back. But the idea of patient waiting is even more important to us today, because of the simple reason that we are much closer to the return of Christ than the believers were in James’ day. To illustrate the importance of patience, James reminds us of the patience of the farmer, for whom waiting is a part of life.

He mentions that the farmer has to wait for the autumn and spring rains, which are essential to the farmers in that part of the world. It didn't rain for most of the year, which made these rains much more important, because they needed the rain to soften the ground. So when the farmer sowed the seed, he was acting in faith that there would be rains in the spring to help the grain ripen and mature.

Even farmers in this part of the world find themselves many times at the mercy of the elements. They can do their best, using all their skill and finest equipment, but ultimately many of them have to wait. Having lived in the Mississippi Delta for eight years, I've watched the farmers work to disc the soil. I've watched them plant the seed, spray for insects, and fertilize. But then they had to wait. Unless they have very expensive, very sophisticated irrigation systems, they are completely helpless until harvest. They understand the importance of patience.

But our English word "patience" is a very weak translation of the word James used. James actually put two words together. One means "long" and the other means "anger." So a more accurate translation is "long-tempered," meaning the ability to deal with difficult and irritating people without losing it! This is a characteristic of Almighty God: He's described in Exodus as being "*the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness*" (Exodus 34:6). Listen to this from 2 Peter 3:9—"*The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is **patient** with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*" So when we are "long-tempered" toward others, especially in the days until the Lord's return, we are imitating our Heavenly Father.

There's another idea here in this word which might help us all to understand this a little better. The word indicates someone who has the power to crush someone else in an instant by simple retaliation, but he chooses not to. Joel Gregory uses the example of little puppies that play around an old hound, nipping at him, climbing all over him, scratching at his nose. The older dog could kill or maim one of the puppies with one swipe of his paw, but he doesn't. He waits. He's patient. He's "long-tempered."

That's a good analogy, but we are not old hounds, and the kind of patience we are called upon to build into our lives is much more than a mere toleration of things which annoy us. According to what James was saying here, we are to make a decisive choice to be long-tempered as a part of our characters as Christians.

According to 1 Corinthians 4:5, that decision will have a profound impact on the way we conduct ourselves until the Lord's coming: *"Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God."*

The application for us believers is to refrain from retaliation, especially when it well within our rights and our power to do so. When Jesus returns, He will set right all the wrongs which have been done against His people, and we should wait patiently for that time to arrive. We are looking further down the road than do those who do not know Christ. We know He is returning, and therefore we should be "long-tempered."

2 Stand firm, v. 8b

Being patient isn't nearly enough. When our lives come under attack because of our faithfulness and obedience to Christ, it will not be enough to say, "I'm just being patient, waiting for Jesus to return." That kind of patience will wear thin in a hurry! It's really not patience at all; it's only toleration. At the end of verse eight in the NIV, James tell us to *"stand firm."* The literal translation is "strengthen your heart," meaning "be strong in your inner being," with the idea being that we should make sure that we have solid support for troubled times.

How strong we need to be in our hearts or our inner beings is more clearly understood when we look at other places in the New Testament where the same word is used. When Jesus was nearing the time for His arrest and crucifixion, the Scripture says that He *"resolutely set out to go to Jerusalem"* (Luke 9:51), or as the King James Version reads, He *"steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem."* The words translated "resolutely set out" or "steadfastly set His face" are the same as "stand firm" here in James 5:8.

In Luke 16:26, this word is used to describe the great gulf which is "fixed" between heaven and hell. If we can face our difficulties with the same kind of determination and steadfastness of spirit as Jesus faced the Cross, and with the same permanence with which heaven and hell are separated, we will be able to stare into the eye of the tornado without being swept away by the winds of persecution.

But there's more! In 1 Thessalonians 3:13 we read that this strengthening of our inner beings is a work of God in our lives, specifically so that we might be prepared for the day of His return: "*May he **strengthen your hearts** [same word!] so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.*"

We learn in 1 Peter 5:10 that after a period of suffering on the part of believers in Christ, God "*will himself restore you and make you strong, **firm** [same word!] and steadfast.*" Jesus told Peter that after he had betrayed Jesus and then repented, he should "**strengthen**" his brothers, and we learn that strengthening ourselves is dependent upon the degree to which we strengthen each other. Do you see that? The more we work to strengthen others, the stronger we will be. We should stand firm.

3 Don't grumble against each other, v. 9

In verse nine, James instructs us to adjust our attitudes about each other. "*Don't grumble against each other, brothers...*" The word for "*grumble*" which James used here means "to sigh or groan inwardly," when there might be audible sounds, but not necessarily. When we understand the way James actually wrote this, and that what he really said was "Stop groaning against each other," then we see that apparently some of his first readers were already engaged in the habit! They had been waiting and waiting for the Lord to return, but when He didn't abide by their schedules, and when they began to experience suffering and persecution because of their faith, they fell into a bad attitude. As a result, they began to quarrel and snipe and criticize each other.

When we are under a great deal of pressure from without, it is easy to begin to look at each other and find things wrong with each other. Let's be honest about this: none of us have to look very far to find something wrong, do we? And when we are tired, weary and discouraged, we tend to take our eyes off the truth that Jesus is going to return some day. But there's another truth here which needs to be uncovered before the tornado arrives.

Though we can't see it in our English Bibles, James used a play on words in verses eight and nine. The words for "stand firm" and "grumble" sound very much alike, and they are placed in contrast to each other. So James was saying, "Instead of doing this, do this." Instead of grumbling against each other, stand firm in your faith. And since the Bible puts these two in contrast to each other, I would like to

suggest that it is not possible to do both. We cannot stand firm, and continue to grumble against each other. Take your pick—it's one or the other.

Reach back and remember that those you've known who seem to delight in picking others apart or complaining about every little thing are not those who make an impression as to the firmness of their faith. Or get more personal than that—when you've been standing firm in your faith, you had neither the time nor the desire to grumble against anyone else, did you?

James had just warned his readers to guard against the kind of spirit which causes us to gripe and groan against each other. In chapter 4, verses eleven and twelve, we read, *“Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you—who are you to judge your neighbor?”* You see, bickering and fault-finding seriously undermine our life together.

The advice of verse nine would be important at any time among God's people, but considering that the Day of His Appearing is closer than ever, it is more urgent than ever that we follow this command. James says, “Stop grumbling against each other, since the Lord is so close to returning.” He said, “The Judge is standing at the door.”

One commentator (Ethel Barrett) says that it was as if James was saying: “What? Are you *still* at each other's throats? *When the Lord is at the door?*” Though we may all have a tendency to push ourselves forward to get the things we want, think of how ashamed we would all feel should the Lord return at the very moment we are tearing each other apart!

But there's more here, too! The word “door” is actually plural; the Lord is not standing at just one door, but at many doors. At which doors is He standing? I believe they are the doors to our hearts. He's standing at the door to my heart, and the door to your heart, and He's listening to everything that's going on inside. That does put a little different perspective on everything, doesn't it?

4 Study the prophets for encouragement, v. 10

Hearing someone tell us to simply be patient does not always do the trick. Sometimes it helps to look at how others before us have dealt with very similar situations in their lives. How did they do it? What resources did they use to cope with difficult times in their lives? Well, that's another anchor James shares with us we can use when we are being tossed around in a storm. He said, "*Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.*" Most of the Old Testament prophets suffered greatly because they spoke without apology the messages God gave them. James reminds us that they would not have been faithful witnesses had they not patiently endured.

The fact that the prophets were treated shamefully was well-known. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "*Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you*" (Matthew 5:11-12). In his sermon in the Book of Acts, Stephen asked, "*Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute?*" (Acts 7:52a).

Jeremiah was a good example. There were plenty of times he looked right into the eye of a tornado of persecution. After he preached his first sermon, his own family tried to kill him! When he spoke to the people from the gate of the Temple on a feast day, he told them that their worship was worthless because it didn't mean anything to them. That's not the way to win friends, but God didn't call him to win friends. As a result of his faithfulness, Jeremiah was beaten, put in the stocks, thrown into prison, and cast down into a muddy, stinking cistern—all because he faithfully proclaimed the Word of God. It isn't always easy to follow God obediently—sometimes it's the hardest thing you can do.

Joel Gregory has written: "How pale contemporary Christian complaints look alongside Jeremiah's life! One quits a Sunday School class because of a personal slight. Another quits giving because he does not like the color of the new carpet in the sanctuary. Another stops attending worship because the pastor preaches five minutes past noon and infringes on the televised football game. How pathetically shallow such excuses look compared to Jeremiah's life! Baptists often stress the gospel of a good start. We also need to emphasize equally the gospel of a good finish" (Joel Gregory, "*James: Faith Works*," Nashville: Convention Press, 1986, p. 106).

In verse ten here in James 5, James used the word “example”—“*Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.*” The word referred to letters formed in a child’s schoolbook. The children would place a kind of tracing paper over the books to learn how to form their letters correctly. James was saying, “Look at the prophets. Look at how they endured horrible persecution—at the hands of God’s own people! Copy them; trace your lives over their lives. Use them as your example.”

Kansas farmer Will Keller looked right up into the eye of a tornado. The tornadoes of persecution are beginning to form even now in our country, and we Christians in our land may soon find ourselves staring right into the eye of a tornado of a different sort. We need to begin preparing ourselves now for that day. When the tornadoes of persecution begin approaching across the land, will you have any resources at your disposal to provide strength and stability during turbulent times?

For those times when we are staring into the eyes of our own personal tornadoes, God’s Word tells us **“Be patient. Stand firm. Don’t grumble against each other. Study the prophets for encouragement.”**

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