



James

Catholic Scripture Study

Patience and the Return of the Lord

History of the Early World	Patriarchs	Israel in Egypt	Conquest of Canaan	Judges	United Kingdom	Divided Kingdom Exile	Exile	Return	Maccabean Revolt	Jesus the Messiah	Church
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Introduction

The audience to whom James is writing was no doubt going through very difficult times at the hands of the wealthy. As a result, the temptation was to become impatient. James did not encourage his readers to compete or strive with the rich for material gain, neither did he exhort them to give up, resulting in despair. The particle *oun* (“therefore”) found in verse 7 connects the preceding paragraph about the judgment of the rich with James exhortation to be patient. But what kind of patience is James telling his readers to have?

James has already emphasized that the goal in the midst of trials and suffering is to become mature and complete (1:3). He now exhorts the readers to be patient in their trials until the Lord comes. The analogy James employs is that of the farmer, who must be patient with his crops until they receive the early and late rains. In the Old Testament, the image of God’s faithfulness was often depicted as the “early and late rains” (Jeremiah 5:24; Joel 2:23). The picture James paints is one of a person demonstrating strength and action based on the Lord’s faithfulness in difficult situations. We are not to be passive in suffering, but like the farmer, actively exercising patience in our circumstances with our motivation being the Lord’s return.



James 5:7-11

7 Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it until it receives the early and the late rain. 8 You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. 9 Do not grumble, brethren, against one another, that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the doors. 10 As an example of suffering and patience, brethren, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. 11 Behold, we call those happy who were steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.





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Questions on the Text

Have you ever...

1. Have you ever been discouraged about things until you remembered an upcoming event?
2. Are there certain people you are more impatient around than others?
3. Have you ever said, “we’ve done all we can do, now all we can do is wait?”

Homework

1. In what areas of your life are you impatient?
2. As Christians we are taught not to grumble against each other. The word “grumble” speaks of inner distress more than public complaining. What James is discouraging is the unexpressed bitterness and resentment that manifests in groans and sighs. What person or circumstance in your life tends to draw a groan from you? Why?
3. When you think of a patient person, who comes to mind? Briefly describe what it means to be patient?
4. James encourages his suffering brethren by reminding them of Christ’s return. Today we often hear the phrase, “I can’t see the light at the end of the tunnel.” Sometimes we seem so shrouded in darkness that we cling to the encouraging words of a friend who says, “These trying times will one day cease to be a problem, it will all be over with soon.” How have you helped a friend see the “light at the end of the tunnel” and how did your words become their lifeline?
5. Why is it that we are so focused on the end results? When you think of the Lord’s return, what comes to mind?
6. If you knew that the Lord was going to return within a year, how would it change your life goals, and would you face your suffering differently?



Questions for Reflection

1. James 5:7 counsels us to have patience until the Lord comes. This ultimately means, of course, Jesus’ Second Coming at the end of time. But are there other ways the Lord comes to give justice to the oppressed? Can you give an example of how patience in waiting for his coming has borne fruit in your life?
2. James 5:7 compares our patience to that of a farmer and implies that justice, like the crops, is slow-ripening but certain. Can you describe ways in which you have watched the coming of Christ’s justice ripen and bear fruit? What did you do while you were waiting patiently?





Questions for Reflection (cont.)

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3. In Palestine, the early rains came in October and November soon after the grain was sown, and the latter rains came in April and May as the grain was maturing. Obviously the grain did not simply mature on its own but responded to the care of the farmer. How are our children, our marriages and our homes dependent upon our patient care before reaching their respective maturity?
4. Because God has promised the early and late rains, the farmer can be patient in laboring, knowing that his crop is ultimately dependent upon God. Likewise, God has promised Christ's return; therefore Christians can be patient in the midst of their hardships. Why does contemplating Christ's return make a difference in our sufferings?
5. James 5:9 addresses those who "grumble" against one another. What is the difference between grumbling and the legitimate airing of differences? What practical steps can we take to resolve conflict in a Christian way that neither pretends there's no problem nor "grumbles"?
6. How is grumbling (5:9) against one another an example of being impatient? How can the anticipation of the Lord's return help us when we are tempted to grumble?
7. James 5:10 urges us to contemplate the example of the prophets as models of steadfastness. In the same way, we as Catholics look at the lives of the saints. Is there a saint who was a model of steadfastness in a way that particularly speaks to you?
8. James 5:11 says, "We call those happy who were steadfast." Modern society does not normally associate "steadfastness" with happiness, but with long periods of pain and suffering we imagine to be futile (i.e. "She stood steadfastly by her husband until he was healed of disease"). Yet musicians or athletes who are faithful to their training can still show us how steadfastness can issue in happiness. Can you name some concrete and practical ways in which you or someone you know have steadfastly endured some period of discipline or suffering and seen the fruit of happiness at the end? How did you or they do it?
9. James 5:11 reminds us that, in the case of Job, we have "seen the purpose of the Lord". In the midst of our own suffering, this is often much hard to do. What things can we do to hold on to faith in God when we are, like Job, suffering deeply?
10. Romans 12:12-21 says, "Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; never be conceited. Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Discuss how these verses resemble the active patience mentioned in James. Also, why is taking vengeance not fruitful?





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Opportunities for Additional Study

Points to Ponder

Compassion and Mercy

James tells us, “The Lord is compassionate and merciful” (James 5:11). “Compassion” and “mercy” are words that get linked so often people have come to assume they are synonyms. In reality however, the two terms are quite different. “Compassion,” comes from a Latin term meaning, “to suffer with”. To have compassion on someone is to come alongside him or her and bear the burden of their pain along with them. The Good Samaritan in Jesus’ parable was compassionate. He quite literally bore the burden of the injured man by lifting him up and putting him on his donkey. Compassion can be shown to anyone, regardless of the reasons they are suffering. There is no presumption that the suffering person is hurting due to their sins. There is merely the will to bear the pain of the sufferer.

In contrast, mercy presumes sin. In the words of Shakespeare, “Whereto serves mercy but to confront the visage of offense?” In other words, we only show mercy to those who have sinned. If they have not sinned, we excuse, we do not show mercy. We say, “There’s nothing to forgive.” But to the one who really has kicked us, robbed us, or otherwise willfully injured us, we do not say, “There’s nothing to forgive.” We show mercy because there’s plenty to forgive.

James notes that God is both compassionate and merciful. That is, he both bears our pain (and hurtful things we sometimes unwittingly do because of that pain), and he has mercy on the sinful things we do of our own free will. God’s healing extends to the whole of our life. It not only supplies what we lack simply because we are *weak and wounded* creatures, it atones for what we do as *rebellious* creatures and even makes us into *renewed* creatures who are made participants in the divine nature.

Patience

“Lord,” says the old wisecrack, “give me patience and give it to me *right this second!*” Much of the epistle of James concerns itself, in one way or another, with the virtue of patience. We in the modern world do not really know what to do with the Christian demand for patience. That is because we deeply believe in the value of work and are obsessed with the need to *get things done*. The virtue of patience teaches us there is value in having to wait around seemingly getting nothing done, as even our Lord himself spent thirty years preparing for the beginning of his public ministry. Patience calls us to face the fact of our poverty and to recognize that there are certain situations in which we can do little or perhaps even nothing to change things. Some of those situations, of course, will change by themselves. The fever will break, the unpleasant job will not last forever, weeping shall, very often, be only for a night. Other situations, however, call us to a lifetime of patience: the disabled child, the struggle with our own pride, the annoying mother-in-law. In the crucible of such situations, God takes the coal of our life, exerts long slow pressure upon it and, by our “long obedience in the same direction” transforms that coal into diamonds. It’s not a quick fix. It’s the real thing.





Opportunities for Additional Study (cont.)



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Job and James

Interestingly, James places his warning against the swearing of oaths (James 5:12) in the middle of a short discussion of suffering. In particular, James notes the example of Job (v. 11). Yet, Job 31 contains the longest oath-swearing in the Bible — the entire chapter is one protracted oath in which Job says in essence, “If I have done evil, then let God go ahead and allow evil to come upon me!” Even more interestingly, many scholars argue that Job 31 is the “continental divide” of the whole book of Job. In terms of literary structure, chapter 31 is the turning point of the book. Everything up until then, Job did in vain. He cries out to God, curses the day of his birth, rebukes his wife, rebukes his friends, and defends himself for thirty chapters. It is suddenly, after chapter 31 (and after Elihu’s remarks), that God takes action — apparently in direct connection to Job’s oath. We may say that Job did what Adam should have done. He was in over his head. He was facing Leviathan and Behemoth, (that is, images of Satan), so he did the only thing that he could do: he called upon the name of God. Ironically though, he did not do this to save his own reputation. He did it, in a certain sense, to save God’s. Obviously, of course, he sought deliverance. But what motivated him was the thought, “If I am being judged, then God is not just, and that is impossible.” So he, in essence, challenges God, “If you are condemning me, then your reputation as Judge is at stake.” And he calls these curses down upon himself in the full confidence that they cannot come to pass, for he has done no evil and God will vindicate him.

With all this in view, James (like Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount [Matthew 5:33-37]) has the misuse of oath swearing in mind. Both James and Jesus insist that the use of oaths is holy, if and only if people who wish to serve God by attending the needs of others use it. The purpose of an oath is to call upon God and ask for the needed strength for a public, official, and sacred task undertaken for the common good. In the vast majority of cases, however, people swear unholy oaths who are untrustworthy and who therefore have to invoke the sacred name of God in order to reinforce their unreliable testimony. In so doing, they disgrace the Holy Name. And people are all the more disposed to make such rash oaths when they are suffering.

Holy oath swearing, however, goes by another name. If swearing is invoking the holy name of God, then the most common, acceptable, and powerful form of oath swearing is prayer. Like Job, when we face the prospect of suffering we are disposed to swear oaths. And so James turns us from swearing unholy oaths to prayer in the very next verse (James 5:13): “is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.” In effect then, the suffering person does — through prayer — what Job did through his holy oath swearing.





Opportunities for Additional Study (cont.)



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Catechism Connection

Referenced from the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

No. 613 "...one of the qualities of prayer: it is necessary to pray always without ceasing and with the patience of faith."

No. 1843 "By hope we desire, and with steadfast trust await from God, eternal life and the graces to merit it."

No. 1832 "The fruits of the Spirit [patience] are perfection's that the Holy Spirit forms in us as the first fruits of eternal glory."

No. 2715 "... the countenance of Jesus illumines the eyes of our heart and teaches us to see everything in the light of his truth and his compassion for all men."

Family Devotions

"The Church teaches us that we are to be trusting God in every circumstance, even in adversity.

A prayer of St. Teresa of Jesus wonderfully expresses this trust:

'Let nothing trouble you / Let nothing frighten you

Everything passes / God never changes

Patience / Obtains all

Whoever has God / Wants for nothing

God alone is enough.'" – St. Teresa of Jesus

The Church progresses on her pilgrimage amidst this world's persecutions and God's consolations. – St. Augustine

Rome to Home

A papal quote relating to the lesson:

"The Holy Spirit gives the Christian the strength of fidelity, patience and perseverance on the path of good and in the struggle against evil... In his Letter to the Galatians, among the 'fruits of the Holy Spirit,' St. Paul lists 'patience,' 'fidelity' and 'self-control' (cf. Gal 5:22). These virtues are necessary for a consistent Christian life. Among them 'patience' is singled out; it is a property of charity (cf. 1 Cor 13:4) and is infused into the soul by the Holy Spirit with charity itself (cf. Rom 5:5), as part of the fortitude to be practiced in confronting evil and the tribulations of life and death."

~Pope John Paul II. General audience of 6/26/91





In this lesson, we observed that:

It is inevitable, when facing trials and suffering, our gaze will be fixed on something. We will fix our gaze on how unfair life is, or how successful the neighbors down the street seem to be, or how we just don't have what it takes to fulfill our own goals. James reminds us that keeping our eyes on the end, that is the return of Christ, will make all the difference in the world. Do what the prophets of old did -- fix your gaze on God in the midst of suffering. The point James has been trying to get his audience to see is that the Lord is different; he is full of compassion.

We too can become more like Jesus, even in the midst of our suffering. The key is to fix our gaze upon him and his coming. The *Catechism* gives us tremendous insight here. "Contemplation is a gaze of faith, fixed on Jesus. 'I look at him and he looks at me'... His gaze purifies our heart; the light of the countenance of Jesus illumines the eyes of our heart and teaches us to see everything in the light of his truth and his compassion for all men. Contemplation also turns its gaze on the mysteries of the life of Christ" (No. 2715).

A Message from the Authors

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God Bless,

Scott, Jeff, Mark and Gayle

