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James 2,7-11

Advent 2 — 7 December 2014

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the Epistle of Saint James, which was read earlier:

Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord.

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: An American humorist once characterized modern life with the following prayer: “Dear God, give me patience. And I want it right now!”

That almost seems like a contradiction in modern life – we want virtues which will help us live a better life, but we don’t want to wait too long to see results. This is reflected in both secular as well as Christian advice books on a host of subjects. Whether it is “30 Days to a Better You” or “30 Days to a Better Prayer Life,” the idea is that results can be achieved in a relatively short period of time. Certainly not more than 30 days – at the most! Unfortunately and needless to say, life often isn’t like that.

Things become more troublesome when people encounter difficulties, difficulties for which there are no quick and easy solutions.

The problem that James is addressing is persecution which the early Jewish Christians experienced in Jerusalem. At rare times, the persecution could result in death. That's what happened to James when in AD 62 the Romans were replacing governors and the religious authorities in Jerusalem took advantage of the absence of the Roman governor and illegally seized James and put him to death. Most of the time, though, the persecution was more along the lines of social isolation and economic discrimination. It affected the lives of early believers and also seemingly had a bad effect on their relations with each other.

James thus tells them to be patient. This brings me to my sermon theme for today, "**Patience Serves God's Purposes**" I'll develop this theme in three parts:

- 1) Patience Is Not Resignation**
- 2) Patience Is God's Gift To Believers; and,**
- 3) Patience Strengthens Hearts**

1) Patience Is Not Resignation. The James who wrote this letter to Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and probably the rest of Palestine was Jesus' brother. During Jesus' life time, James did not believe in Jesus as the Messiah (John 5,7). After Jesus' resurrection, however, Jesus appeared to James (1

Corinthians 15,7). By Pentecost, it would seem that James and the rest of Jesus' brothers believed in Jesus as the Messiah (Acts 1,14; 1 Corinthians 9,5). James' belief and piety were such that even though he technically was not an apostle, he became the leader of the Jerusalem church (Acts 12,17; 15,13ff). Paul even refers to James as one of the "pillars of the church," and ranks him ahead of Peter and John as well as himself (Galatians 2,7).

James wrote his letter about AD 45, before the Jerusalem Council met in AD 49-50 to deal with an influx of Gentiles into the Church. While James was the head of the Jerusalem church, the church itself was poor, tired, oppressed, and depressed. The first few verses of chapter five bring this out.

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you. ² Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. ³ Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure! ⁴ Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, *and* which has been withheld by you, cries out *against you*; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. ⁵ You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. ⁶ You have condemned and put to death the righteous *man*; he does not resist you. (James 5,1-6)

The problems which are clearly identified is that the rich, absentee landlords oppressed the poor through rapaciousness, withholding wages, and wantonness. To withhold a day laborer's wages was a sin which cried out to God for vengeance (Leviticus 19,13; Deuteronomy 24,14-15). To withhold a wage meant that a family would go hungry. For the early Jerusalem Christians, it seems they were victims of the ruling classes, perhaps last hired and first fired. Since the rich are not described as "brothers," it is probable that they were unbelievers.

There are three possible responses to this kind of oppression. Armed resistance, resignation, or waiting patiently with a purpose.

Armed resistance was tried by the Jews against the Romans and began in AD 66 and ended in AD 70 with the Roman conquest and destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

Resignation, or sitting around and grinding one's teeth, destroys the soul.

Waiting patiently with a purpose, however, offers hope in an otherwise hopeless situation. Why is that? Because James gives his readers God's perspective on things. The rich may think that they have it made, but God says otherwise.

As an example, James speaks about the who farmer waits patiently for his crops and prays to God to send rain at the proper times. There is nothing else that a farmer can do. But the farmer waits with a purpose, because he knows that when

the crop is harvested it will yield a rich bounty.

Likewise, in waiting for the promise of Jesus' return, the believer then and now knows the Jesus' promise is life eternal with him – a life without tears, sorrow, sickness, or death. But this waiting is the product of a faith that undergoes tests and trials in this world and realizes that

2) Patience Is God's Gift To Believers. Paul tells us that patience is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5,22).

In Greek the word for “patience” is made up of two separate words: “long” and “suffering.” As such, it first shows God's attitude toward us. God is long-suffering, or patient toward us. This is clearly taught in the Old Testament as we read Exodus 34, where God speaks of Himself:

The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth;⁷ Who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, Who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, ... (Exodus 34,6-7)

Paul says the same thing in his Letter to the Romans:

Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? (Romans 2,4)'

There is no question that God promises to punish sin. But

He also shows us His patience and longsuffering when we sorrow over our sins and repent of our sins – we know to Whom we can turn for forgiveness. Patience then directs our attention to Jesus. The Letter to the Hebrews asks us to

fix our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of faith, Who for the joy set before Him endured the Cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrew 12,2)

That Jesus endured the Cross is another New Testament word for suffering long, for persevering under trials. For us and for our sins, Jesus patiently suffered the Cross. He did so because of the joy that by such patient endurance He would earn for us the forgiveness of sins and the subsequent joy of heaven itself. Jesus' earthly life was a life which prepared Him for the Cross. There was no way to take a short cut.

Jesus went to the tree of death so that by rising on the third day He could become our Tree of Life. One of the fruits of that Tree is patience, or long suffering. This patience enables us to not only endure the trials of life but also look forward to the joys which will await us at Jesus' right hand when He will come again in glory. Waiting with a purpose shows us that

3) Patience Strengthens Hearts. We need to have our hearts strengthened because if we just are resigned to our fate in this world, grumbling and grinding our teeth in discontent, then we have misunderstood what patience is all about. This strengthening enables us to overcome the resignation of despair.

The result of strengthening is shown in our text:

You too be patient; strengthen your hearts, for the Coming of the Lord is near. ⁹ Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door. ¹⁰ As an example, brethren, of suffering and patience, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹ We count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord's dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and *is* merciful. (vv 8-11)

James was addressing a problem in the congregation. Instead of having patience, the believers in Jerusalem were complaining against one another. Perhaps some had jobs and some did not. Who or what is to blame? Comparatively speaking, some were seemingly better off than others. Again, the cycle of blame and mutual recrimination cycles ever downward and is seemingly endless. Where does it all lead? It leads to a spiritual dead end, dead in sin and trespasses.

The picture is almost like that of naughty children who are misbehaving in a classroom, then all of a sudden there is a whisper, "The teacher is coming." In this case, the voice of James booms out: "Behold, the Judge is standing right at the door!" To persist in sin means to meet Jesus as Judge; the picture is not pretty. But this word of Law is to shock the congregation into remembering that their Savior does not want to meet them as judge, but as a merciful and compassionate

Savior who is willing to forgive.

That Jesus stands at the door, however, is also a word of encouragement, a word of encouragement to put their troubles into perspective, the perspective of eternity. James tells the people to look at the prophets who patiently endured, for example, an Amos who was forbidden to speak (Amos 7), or Elijah who was pursued by Jezebel (1 Kings 19, Iff), or Jeremiah who was imprisoned by King Zedekiah (Jeremiah 38). These were men of faith who stood steadfast in God's Word. Of this persecution Jesus Himself spoke:

Blessed are you when men revile you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, on account of Me. Rejoice, and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great. For so they persecuted the prophets before you.
(Matthew 5,11-12)

Paul speaks in the same manner when he says:

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. And everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things – can we say “patience in all things”? – They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. (1 Corinthians 9,24-25)

This patience, which is God's gift and always has a purpose, and then strengthens the believer's heart of faith. This strengthening enables the believer not only to live with the

persecution that comes from without, but also enables him – or her – to live with fellow believers. To live in patience without sinning either against God or one’s neighbor.

Can we live without sinning? No! That is why God calls us daily to repentance. That is why He offers us the body and blood of His Son in Holy Communion so that we might be strengthened, strengthened to live for Him and for one another, patiently awaiting His coming.

Conclusion. Advent is a time of waiting, of waiting for Jesus to come. We cannot hurry Jesus up. In times of persecution, James puts patience in the perspective of eternity. Patience is waiting with a purpose, and not just being resigned to one’s fate. It is God’s gift to us. It is shown in the patience of Jesus, who after a lifetime of preparation went to the Cross, and endured it, to win for us forgiveness and eternal life.

It is the patience that strengthens our hearts to live lives of repentance under God’s forgiveness. It is being assured that in the end God will indeed right all wrongs. In Jesus God has shown us what true patience is, and it cannot be better expressed than in the words of Psalm 103:

The Lord is compassionate and gracious.
Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness. (Psalm 103,8)
Amen.

Now, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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