

# A Study in James

## The Tests of a Living Faith

James 5:7–12

April 3, 2013

### Introduction

Previously we saw how the wicked rich have taken advantage of the saints by dragging them into court, defrauding them of their wages, and even murdering those who got in their way. Many of the saints had endured this kind of persecution. James will now use this problem to discuss the next test of a living faith: perseverance.

### **Test #8: A Living Faith and Perseverance (5:7–12)**

James is calling on his readers as righteous saints to persevere in the faith in response to persecution and suffering. With the previous three tests, James's readers had failed to measure up, so he called them to repentance and correction. With this test, James is showing how a living faith is evidenced and is calling upon his readers to comply. He assumed his audience was passing the test and urged them to continue. For us today, demonstrating perseverance will produce assurance of salvation and a result in reward when we stand before the Lord (2 Cor 5:9–10).

### **Handling Persecution with Patience (vv. 7–8)**

The key word in these verses is *patience*. This means being able to tolerate a difficult situation for a long time without lashing out. In our country, much of the overt persecution of Christians has been curtailed by our forefathers who drew up legislation against such injustices. However, those protections are slowly being eroded away by those who oppose the gospel of Christ. It may well be in the not-so-distant future that we see some of the same kinds of overt persecution described in the Scriptures. But there are still many subtler forms of oppression. Perhaps you have coworkers who mock your faith, or a boss who makes your life difficult because you are a Christian. Perhaps you have even been a target for the homosexual or atheist legal groups trying to limit your evangelistic activities or worship practices. Whatever the case, those with a living faith are called upon to patiently endure in the midst of affliction. This is true for slaves (employees) (Eph 6:5–8) and any other person who suffers for the sake of righteousness (1 Pet 2:18–19).

### Perseverance Results in Reward (v. 7)

Just as the farmer waits for his crops to grow, the believer should patiently endure affliction. The Lord's return is often pictured in Scripture as a harvest (e.g. Parable of the Tares, Matt 13:24–30, 36–43). The harvest the farmer gathers here is akin to the reward the believer is given when he stands before the Lord in judgment.

### Persevere Because the Lord will Return (v. 8)

From a human perspective, we may have to patiently endure a situation for a while because Jesus' return may not be immediate. However, this verse teaches that the Lord's return is imminent — it could happen at any moment. We should continue persevering so that we can be found faithful at His coming. This does present somewhat of an awkward tension between living for the moment and planning for the future. But we can face the future with confidence when we humbly submit our plans to the Lord's will (James 4:13–15).

### **Applications of Perseverance (vv. 9–12)**

James makes two applications from his exhortation to patient perseverance. The first is that perseverance responds to persecution by not criticizing others. Secondly, perseverance means not responding to persecution by giving false oaths.

### The Prohibition against Condemning a Brother (vv. 9–11)

James exhorts us not to grumble or complain against one another because of persecution. It can be easy at times to play “kick the cat,” passing on our frustration to the next defenseless victim who we can persecute with impunity. And oftentimes, that person will be a fellow brother or sister in Christ. However, James informs us that such retaliation is not only sinful, but will also incur the Lord's judgment.

### *Avoiding the Lord's Censure (v. 9)*

The Scriptures assure us that those who persecute the saints will be held accountable when the Lord returns. But as persecuted saints, we need to wait for validation from the Lord who will plead our case. The grumbling here is actually an inward kind of complaining — critical comments muttered under your breath. This kind of groaning or sighing typically comes from a desire to be free from present suffering. James warns us that to respond with critical complaints against others is to exercise the same kind of judgmental spirit he has warned us about

(4:11–12; cf. Matt 7:1–5). The phrase “the Judge is at the door” should be a reminder that judgment is not some distant far-off event. We will all be called to account, and in these “last days” Christian conduct should always be considered in light of the Lord’s immanent return.

### *Examples of Perseverance (vv. 10–11)*

At times we may feel like giving up. The stress and pressures of persecution can take their toll on us. But we are not alone in our struggles. James gives us two examples of those who have patiently endured in the midst of affliction.

#### 1) The Prophets

The first example involves the whole category of prophets. As a group, they had a message to deliver from God. Often that message met with rejection and persecution for the prophet. But despite the reception of the message, the prophets remained faithful to deliver it. Likewise, we should remain faithful, not lashing out, but patiently enduring persecution even when our message — the gospel — is met with hostility.

#### 2) Job

With Job, James shifts the focus from patience as a non-retaliatory spirit to patience as steadfast suffering. Job is a man who endured the loss of wealth, family, reputation, and physical health. Many who endure such loss might be tempted to “curse God and die” (Job 2:9). But what Job demonstrated for us was a steadfast commitment to his faith. Notice that James does not say that Job was long-suffering or patient. Job did lash out at times in frustration (Job 3:3, 11). What James is trying to convey is that through all the suffering and affliction, Job continued to trust in God. Likewise, we should have the same kind of unwavering faith in our Savior.

#### The Prohibition against Breaking an Oath (v. 12)

I understand verse 12 to be part of this test regarding perseverance. The verse begins with the Greek word *δε* (translated *but* or *moreover*) continuing the thought from before. As such, James is cautioning against indiscriminate oath-taking in the midst of persecution. In our attempts to avoid showing impatience toward our persecutors, we should first of all avoid swearing. James is not condemning the use of vulgar profanity here (although it is condemned elsewhere in Scripture, Eph 4:29). What James is particularly concerned with is a believer, who,

in the midst of persecution, may be tempted to deny his guilt by reinforcing his statement with an oath. This is what Peter did when a servant girl accused him of him of being a follower of Jesus (Matt 26:72).

We are commanded here to refrain from swearing by heaven or earth or with any other oath. Varying the object by which we swear really makes little difference. Jesus explained that trying to alter the object of our oath (in order to allow for a loophole) still implicates God just the same (Matt 5:33–37). Also, calling down a curse or catastrophe upon our own head if a vow should be broken is not within our control. Instead, James calls us to affirm the truth with a simple “yes” or “no.” As Christians, our word should be so sure, that a yes or no will *always* mean a yes or no.

Does this mean we should never take an oath, even in a courtroom? We may think of this question as difficult to answer, especially given Paul’s use of the phrase “God is my witness” (e.g. Rom 1:9). Verse 12 is not prohibiting us from making an official witness statement in court, although we would be better off saying “I affirm” rather than “I swear.” Regarding Paul’s statement, he is an apostle writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. While Paul is testifying of the truth in an official capacity in God’s word, I would not recommend using the phrase “God is my witness” to back up our own truth claims in everyday conversation. The problem with oaths is that God expects the person making the oath to keep it, even if he is powerless to do so. Breaking an oath will incur the Lord’s judgment.

### **Conclusion**

We will all face difficulty and oppression at some point in our lives. As believers we need to patiently endure these trials by not criticizing others and continuing to trust in God. And above all, we should not resort to oath-taking when the persecution becomes particularly acute. Our testimony as believers should be marked by humility in the midst of suffering and truthfulness in our words.

~AWB