

This morning we could parachute right down onto verse 7 of today’s Scripture, if we wanted to, and pretend nothing else is happening here. But to be honest, starting at verse 7 would be like walking into a room where, unbeknownst to you, a horrible fight had just taken place between two people and in front of a crowd of other people. By the time you get there, someone has begun talking in more measured tones but there is no denying that the air is still charged with electricity from the fight that had just happened because the stunned and scared look in the eyes of everyone in the room confirms for that something big, something bad, had just gone down.

In the case of James 5, the something that had just gone down are the first 6 verses of the chapter in which James—no shrinking violet, mind you—had just given rich folks a real tongue lashing, a moral thrashing, designed to leave these wealthy folks a smoldering ruin. Remember the “Shock and Awe” bombing campaign against Baghdad back in 2003? James lets loose with a rhetorical version of “Shock and Awe.”

Therefore, starting at verse 7 means we would not notice any of this, nor sense the tautness and tenseness of the atmosphere in the room as we stumble into it by starting at verse 7. You see, truth is, the patience and perseverance James urges on his readers starting in verse 7 makes no sense without a context, and in this case it’s a context that is somewhat brutal.

So, I suggest that the best way to incorporate the first six verses is to go back even further and take a good look at the person and the work of Jesus. We shouldn’t look for razzle dazzle, or fireworks lighting up the sky or a political movement with clout and bare-knuckled power. Better to look for embers of hope glowing in the heart of any poor person who heard the Good News from Jesus himself or heard it preached by one of his Apostles. Let’s look for how the power of love could not be unmade by the power of a vicious Roman cross. Jesus’ forerunner, John the Baptist said that, because the Messiah has come, and thanks to the ministry of his followers, the roads that were once very crooked will be made straighter.

Have any of you noticed the media is now telling us that because of supply chain problems we shouldn’t even think about waiting until Black Friday to do our Christmas shopping? There won’t be anything left on the store shelves by then. I’m wondering how many wealthy people in government can’t be bothered with pesky little problems like the nation’s supply chain of goods. It is nothing new, though. It was this way in the Roman

Empire of James' day where wealth was hoarded, and people lived "*in luxury and self-indulgence*," as verse 5 says. Money rules. The rich get richer. The rich can buy their way out of any problem, or so it seems. And the poor cry out over the inequity, over the unfairness, over how those who don't need more money even so cheat and sue the poor anyway just to squeeze out a little more. And if ever there was a season that highlights those who can afford luxury gifts for friends and family and those who cannot, it is, sadly enough, the Christmas shopping season, that apparently begins in mid-October now.

Yet in verse 7 James begins to counsel his fellow believers with patience and with the reassurance that God is indeed on their side and is really bringing a better day. This encouragement does not come out of nowhere. James is giving this counsel in the face of a society—and from the looks of James' letter in the face of a church—that was giving way too much deference to the rich. James is telling people to have patient hope—the hope of Christ's second coming in this case—as a way to say that the way things are is no indication of the way things will always be.

The Gospels tell us Jesus Christ has come to level out mountainous economic inequities, to smooth out the wrinkles in the social fabric, to bring justice to the inherent unfairness of who gets what in life. Those who condemn and murder the innocent (as suggested in verse 6) are not going to get away with it in the end. Not in the final analysis. Not at the end of the cosmic day.

Be patient! Chin up! Or does James' counsel just lead to quietism? Is it wrong to speak up about injustice? Obviously not, or else James would not have written this very epistle! But what James desperately wants is for Christian believers to deal with all of this as believers who live with patience and perseverance.

In James' typically to-the-point style, he says in verses 8 & 9: "*You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!*" Remember how in chapter 4 he said only God can sit in judgment? And I think as a preventative measure he says that *if we are patient and stand firm*, we won't grumble against one another. The word "grumble" brings to my mind the times in the book of Exodus where the Israelites complained against God and Moses. But the concern here is for Christians complaining about each other. When everything is working well, we have no reason to blame anyone. But when we suffer things like illness, adversity, or even jealousy, we look for a cause—tempted to blame those nearest to us. That is simply

counter-productive, because in times of illness or adversity we need to stick together to be mutually supportive rather than mutually destructive. Grumbling about it, attacking one another in frustration, trying to get ahead of God by taking matters into our own hands or, worse yet, adopting the strong-armed tactics of the world never works.

So, James highlights the farmer and the prophets as examples of patience and perseverance. The farmer I understand (I grew up in the country). But I must admit thinking it's a stretch to hear James speak of the prophets as models of patience and perseverance. Faithfulness, yes; patience, not so much. Jonah was the worst in this regard. Called to carry a prophetic word to Nineveh, he first ran away, and then obeyed reluctantly after he had no other choice. He delivered the required word to the Ninevites—but when the Ninevites repented, he became so angry he asked God to take his life. Patient? Not hardly.

Jeremiah complained that he had become a laughingstock and that everyone mocked him. Elijah was more patient. During a God-given drought, he hid in the Kerith ravine where God sustained him with food and water over a period that lasted many months—and perhaps years—and eventually stood up to the prophets of Baal in a dramatic confrontation. However, faced with threats from Jezebel, he asked God to take his life. He also complained to God about the unfaithfulness of the Israelites—claiming that *he* was the only faithful person remaining. Elisha was better at doing what God called him to do without complaint. Likewise, Amos and some of the other prophets.

But James then sites the classic example of patience and perseverance: “*As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job’s perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy*” (v. 11). Job, you remember, was the man who lost everything (and I mean *everything*) but refused to curse God. Allow me to point us to at least one more example of patience found in the New Testament. When John the Baptist was in prison, he sent disciples to ask Jesus, “*Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?*” (Matthew 11:3) Jesus assures them, “*Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed **to the poor**. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me*” (Matthew 11:4-6).

Jesus’ brother James basically does the same thing for his readers—and now for all of us—in James 5. We are called to have quiet hope. We are called to believe that when

things look dim, God's got it covered. That confident and quiet endurance does not make everything "all better" or heal every wound we experience along the way. But it does keep us from lashing out in ways that undercut the Gospel and the church's witness to that Gospel.

In almost any moment of the day, we can whine and scream and cuss about the way things are. But we need to do that complaining with what one person calls "tempered impatience." We are impatient with the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer and ignored. But we can temper our impatience with hope. Christ has come and Christ is coming again. That is the foundation of our hope. Enduring hope animates how we act but is also the lens through which we view this often harsh and unfair world. Hope doesn't solve everything in one fell swoop, but I believe it is far better than having no hope at all.

We are still a month away from Advent, but I am already thinking of that time of year when we focus our hearts and minds on the coming of God's Savior in the Bethlehem babe. Most of the non-biblical stories, songs, and dramas that are clustered around Christmastime would likely not meet with the approval of the Apostles if they could see and hear such things. Much of it is saccharine sentimentality, fairy tales, and goofiness. But I have a funny feeling that if James would have read one such Christmas-related story, he would have liked it, at least a little. The story I am thinking of is Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* in which old Scrooge wakes up Christmas morning a changed man. Gone are the days of his parsimonious and cruel ways and in its place is a new generosity toward all, with a special eye for the poorest and the most vulnerable.

One movie version that I particularly like is the one starring Patrick Stewart. The scene where he wakes up to discover he has another chance concludes with a joyful laughter that emerges like a roar from deep within the old miser. At first you think he is choking to death or on the verge of a major coronary. But no. It's just that Scrooge had not *laughed for joy* for so ever long that he had to remember how to have a good belly laugh. Let's watch that scene... <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vviOGFiGrHc>

The patience and perseverance James urges on his readers is for a day when weeping will turn to laughter, when greed will give way to generosity, and when there will be good reason for the whole creation to laugh for joy.

Amen and Amen.

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