

Determined Discipleship: Finish it

Over the last few weeks we've been walking through the book of James, realising the call to a determined disciple life. This life calls us to FACE the new person Christ is calling us toward, to LIVE out this life committed to Christ, and to allow Christ's work in us to TAME what needs dealing with, and LOSE what needs to be left behind. We now come to the final section of James, a section that calls us towards a disciple life that aims to FINISH IT well.

This week, we'll be looking at two threads within chapter 5: first, being patient in our suffering; and second, the call to be people with patience that means we trust God and those around us. As we approach the final section of the book of James we are encouraged toward '*patient discipleship*'. Patient discipleship is the practice of holding on even when everything looks like it is falling apart. When this sermon series was planned in the autumn last year, how could we imagine how prophetic and relevant James' words would be in April 2020 in our current crisis? At the time James' words were recorded many years ago, he is addressing patient discipleship in the face of Jesus' lack of return – '*until the Lord's coming*', he says in verse 7, an event that was expected in his lifetime. In other words, patience even when Jesus hasn't shown up. James obviously felt that being patient and standing firm were key issues for these new believers in Jerusalem. However, he must have known these would continue to be issues for Christians through the ages.

As a world crying out for an end to the Coronavirus Pandemic, we are similarly called to patience when our hearts just want to cry with the Psalmist in Psalm 13: '*How long, O Lord, how long?*' How long must this forced isolation last? How long before we can see family and friends face to face? How long before we can return to work? To normality? But the life of a disciple is a call to commitment and patience. We are not called to jack it all in the moment it gets difficult. The book of James calls us to be committed, push through it, wait, and be patient with confidence. We are to keep on keeping on.

The root word used for 'patience' in much of the Greek New Testament is *hupomeno*. *Hupomeno* can be translated as 'to remain', or even 'to remain under'. For many of us, the stresses of life can be heavy to carry and can catch us off guard. Often, pressure of life can leave us feeling overwhelmed and worn down. This biblical Greek word paints a picture that can be helpful when life feels like it is coming down on us. One beautiful way of seeing *hupomeno* is

like an umbrella when it is raining. In bad weather, we may choose to remain under the protection of the umbrella. Remain can also mean 'to stay', and we are all being encouraged at the moment to be patient, to remain or stay put under the protection of our own roofs. And it is our patience that will ultimately protect us.

As we find in Galatians 5:22, patience is a product or '*fruit*' of God's presence in our lives. Patience is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, whose character is birthed within us. Because of this, Jesus' patience becomes a kingdom reality in the lives of his disciples. It is this patience that sets us apart from the world. It's not a reality that comes easily, nor should it. Patience is the outworking of God's activity in our lives, and this activity takes time to be worked out in our head, heart and hands. It is the hard work of choosing to receive the Holy Spirit, taking time to rest in him, hear from him, and trust him to change us. And it's as we wait on God, encountering his Spirit, that patience develops into the fruit. We should not be surprised that God's outworking in this area is a lifelong discipleship issue. There aren't many of us, myself included, who are naturally patient. But God invites us through his Holy Spirit to overcome our natural reaction to stress – that of *impatience* – with a supernatural one, that of *peace*. Patience is a reality within us when, and only when, peace is present. Do you remember Jesus' first words to his disciples after his resurrection? They'd seen him die a gruesome death, laid behind an enormous stone and then they hear rumours of his resurrection. How excited and overjoyed they must have been at the prospect of these rumours being true. And yet Jesus' first words to them were '*Peace be with you*'. Into a place of great confusion, Jesus speaks peace. Through an encounter with Jesus, peace becomes present.

James uses the image of a farmer to help explain patience. Verse 7 of chapter 5 says, '*See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains.*' James' readers would have easily understood this analogy. For them, when the rainy season arrived, it arrived with two rains. The early rain would come to soften the soil and cause the seed to wake up and begin to grow. The rain would then stop and time would pass. The farmer would yet again have to wait patiently. Eventually the second rains would come and cause the crop to mature.

But, in our day, we live in a culture where things come right now. We order shopping online and it comes within a day or two. We turn on the tap and water is there. Electricity makes the lights come on within a millisecond. We

don't need to be patient when everything we need is right there when we want it.

But James wants to take us deeper into patience. He wants us to explore the question, '*What about patience when everything is going wrong?*' What if the rain doesn't come? Or what if the rain comes and wipes everything out? Or, in our context, what about when what we depend on being in the shops is no longer there? Or when we can't meet as a Church family, particularly at key festivals such as Palm Sunday and Easter? Or when people we love are falling ill with Covid-19? Or when we live on our own and our friends and relatives cannot visit? What about patience in the face of suffering?

When we're in the middle of suffering, time seems to slow down and our patience can run thin. We find ourselves being impatient and desperate, and we respond by taking matters into our own hands. In times like this, the letter from James calls us to a new place where we trust that God is in control, a place where we realise that, in suffering, we're to fall back on God with our despair and confusion, and continue to journey deeper with him as our trust and patience grow. As an example of this, James points us to the story of Job, an Old Testament disciple who chose to cling on to God when suffering was at its most intense. James reminds us in verse 11: '*We consider 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.*' James prods the early Christians to do as Job did – to not let go and to remember that God will not let us down.

James ends his letter by calling the early Church to pray, as our Archbishops also call us similarly to pray. To finish well we need to be patient and also prayerful. Prayer challenges us to cry out for what is not fair and OK about the world. My heart aches for those living in other countries where it is impossible to self-isolate, where this virus will disproportionately affect the poor, the dispossessed, the orphan, the refugee, those with so little to begin with. James calls us to pray for ourselves, as individuals, for whatever we are struggling with at the moment. He also calls us to pray for those in our church family who are sick, in whatever way we can. And he calls us to pray for each other. Yes, those in our family and church family, but also I think for those affected across the world.

The call to patience is a daily challenge to trust in God's goodness. The writers of the Psalms knew the challenges of life and the patience and trust needed to

hold on to God's promises and provision when things looked bleak. So I end with a couple of passages that might be worth writing out and sticking in a prominent place for you to see over the next few weeks.

Psalm 37, verse 7:

*'Be still before the Lord
and wait patiently for him.'*

Psalm 27, verse 14:

*'Wait for the Lord;
be strong and take heart
and wait for the Lord.'*

And Psalm 55, verse 22:

*'Cast your cares on the Lord
and he will sustain you;
he will never let the righteous be shaken.'*

Amen.