

Throughout the last few weeks we've been taking a look, as we always do this time of year, at what the end is going to be like. We've spent some time recently talking about being ready, being prepared for that last day when our Lord Jesus comes again, because it will come suddenly and without warning. We absolutely do need to be ready for it at all times because it could come at any moment. And as always, if Jesus doesn't return, at the very least any one of us could be called home at any moment. It's something we all should be looking forward to as well, because the joys and the blessings it's going to bring each of us when we can leave this world behind and go to heaven. There's nothing to really compare it to, and there's nothing in this life that's so good that can make us want to say "not quite yet, Lord." And we speak of it as a sort of edge-of-the-seat moment as though we're waiting for it with bated breath.

But then what?

It's not as though the moment never does come, but for most of us, we hear that message and then we do go home, same as we always have. We go to bed and wake up the next day, same as it always was. Yes, that moment when we leave this life could come at any moment, but that doesn't change the fact that we generally spend seventy or eighty years or more in this life. Sure that's a drop in the bucket *compared* to eternity, but it's still a really long time as we experience it right now. And with the normal slings and arrows of outrageous fortune that we suffer in our lifetimes, the wait can start to feel too long. The pains, all piled together seem like too much. The losses seem like they've taken everything we cared about. It's not that they're all that terrible, but we get so weary of bearing them.

The longer we have to bear them all and the longer we have to wait, the greater the temptation to slide into one kind of despair or another while we wait. We are tempted to wonder if God really does care anymore, we start to question his wisdom in leaving us here still when we would be so much happier being with him right now. And day by day something new happens that tries to wear us down just a little more. Loss can hit us very suddenly. We can lose the things we've spent a lifetime building and collecting in one well-placed disaster or some other turn of fate can kick the financial stability right out from underneath us. Potentially even more devastating to us is when we lose the people we care about. We get attached to family and friends and when they are taken out of our lives it's easy to get caught up in the hole they seem to leave behind them in their absence.

But some of the worst to endure are the pains and troubles that come from within us. Physically we have to deal with pains as our own bodies turn against us as they sinful corruption in them spreads. Medical science can do more than it used to but that doesn't mean it really understands much of anything that goes on in us. Conditions they can't explain can afflict us and simply being alive can be a constant source of physical pain for us to endure. And of course as we age we can do less and less and we struggle more and more to just keep going as we think we ought to.

And then there's perhaps the most wearying part of being a Christian still on this earth, our own failures. Even to our old nature it is discouraging how often we fail at what we set out to do, simply because we want to believe we are strong and capable people. But as Christians the sting is worse than that. We want to do what is right, we want to keep our God as the center of our lives and we want to be good and kind to the people around us. But every day we find some way to fail at that. Every day we let something else take the place of God, every day we put our trust in something besides him. And every day we let a selfishness get the better of us. An unkind word or thought, a neglected opportunity to help another, whatever it is. And when we realize our failure it is crushing, not just because we've let ourselves down but our God as well. Our God has done so much for us and he asks for so little in return. Not even as a repayment, not as a demand. When we do fail there is still love and forgiveness. But what he asks seems so simple that it just becomes such a weary burden to fail again and again at doing what is right.

In all of these trials and troubles there are temptations to react poorly. When the difficulty is out of our control, there is the temptation to get angry and to want to accuse someone of hurting us intentionally. And, often finding no nearby scapegoat, our accusing finger can turn to God himself. It is completely irrational, sitting here now, you and I can see that. And yet in the heat of pain and loss, we want to lash out and blame someone and if God is the only target we can find then so be it.

But when the anger has boiled away and we're still left with our loss, or when it's a pain we can't blame anyone for but ourselves, then comes the other temptation: despair. Whatever has happened to us, we can be stuck wondering how things could ever be the same again. We wonder whether we'll ever be as happy and content as we once were. The weariness of dealing with daily pains makes every day a struggle to not just give up altogether. And when it doesn't seem like we're getting any help from the one person we should be able to rely on above everyone else we start to

question that which we know we shouldn't. We are tempted to wonder, "Where is God? Has he stopped caring about what happens to me? Did he ever? Is he even there?"

Waiting on this earth for the day that we're delivered from it is a bleak time. It can be dangerous and difficult. But we are not left without hope or help during that time. James offers us perspective today as we wrestle with any or all of these particular problems: <read text: James 5:7-11>.

James knows what life in this world can be like as we wait and he gives us a very simple instruction from the Lord when it comes to the attitude that we should approach this situation with: he tells us to be patient. But he doesn't just leave it with that kind of pithy statement without offering any help as to how we should actually manage to *be* patient. He paints a picture for us of what our waiting is like. He compares our times of grief to a farmer's field between seasons. The seed is in the ground and the farmer depends on the final harvest for his livelihood, and yet at the moment all he can do is wait for the rains to come. All he has to see is bare, tilled earth. By all appearances there is no hope, and yet he knows that something better is coming. He is patient as he waits because he knows the situation will change. And in our case, we know the situation *will* change with even more certainty because we aren't depending on the weather but rather on a promise of our God. We know his promises never fail and the rain will come.

James further encourages us to consider the example of the prophets of the Old Testament, many of whom endured bleak and bitter times in the service of God without ever seeing the earthly fulfillment of the promises they spoke on the Lord's behalf. He particularly recalls the suffering of Job, which we read about in our Old Testament lesson today. But, let's not get the wrong idea here. He doesn't bring them up and say, "Hey look at what they had to go through! All the stuff you're whining about is nothing compared to what Job suffered. He lost everything in a day and he *still* praised God at the end of it. Stop whining cause it could be so much worse!" That is not what James is saying. Saying it could always be worse is not the answer and as always we do not get to compare crosses with other people. The particular burdens we bear or don't bear are ours alone to deal with. We don't get to look down on someone else because they struggle to handle something we deal with easily and we don't get to be jealous because someone else doesn't struggle with what we do. We are each burdened by sin in our own ways and we have no idea of how or where those burdens hit other people.

Rather he asks us to consider their example of patience and take that into our own lives. Not for us to say, "It could be worse," but rather for us to have the proper understanding and attitude when these situations come that tempt us to anger or depression while we wait. For some situations, a correct understanding beforehand helps us handle loss before it happens. Job had the right attitude when he looked at all he had lost and he simply said, "**The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised.**" (Jb 1:21b) Recognizing that the things in this world were never ours to start with, understanding that all we have is given to us by the Lord and trusting that the Lord will always make sure we have what we need allows us to handle loss without it feeling like loss. When our life changes outside our control and we don't have what we always had, we can recognize the hand of the Lord at work, choosing what is in our possession and not become angry or despair over it.

And it is similarly true when loved ones depart. This pain is more difficult because they are more than just a thing, they were companions on this road. But we again recognize the hand of the Lord at work. And our blessed loved ones who have been taken to his side. We know we must wait, there will be patience needed from us, but we will see them again.

For the pains within, the physical pain of a damaged body, this can be the hardest to be patient with. There's no amount of changing your understanding that simply makes the maddening pain stop. When it's simply there and medical science can do nothing, all we can do is latch on to the trust we hold in a God who loves us. The field may look bare, but we have the sure promise that when the time is right he will send the rain of relief and we will be blessed by it in the end.

And it's that same trust that we hold onto for our own failures. We recognize that we are each both sinner and saint. We will sin. We will fail. This does not give us license to be "okay" with our sin or to shrug it off when it happens. But we understand that it will happen. When it does, we fly back to the arms of our loving God who has promised always to receive us in love. We return to him daily, and each day he reminds us we are forgiven.

The field of earthly life can look pretty bare at times. We need the harvest that is promised out of it but sometimes as we wait we can be tempted to wonder if it's ever coming, or even get angry at God for taking so long. But God is faithful and he will fulfill his promises. The rain will come if we are patient. And the blessings we receive from it will be worth the wait. Amen.