

PERSISTENT PATIENCE

James 5: 7-11

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By December of 1944, the Allies were confident that the war in Europe would soon be over. Paris had been liberated and American and British forces were rapidly advancing towards Germany. In a last ditch effort to blunt the Allied advance, a bold counteroffensive was initiated by the Nazi armies on December 16th. Their plan was to attack through the Ardennes Forest and burst through to the North Sea coast. Known as the Battle of the Bulge, the German advance was initially successful, until it reached Bastogne. Defended by the 101st Airborne Division and commanded by General Anthony McAuliffe, the American forces were running low on everything— food, ammunition and medical supplies to treat the wounded. Nevertheless, when confronted with the demand to surrender, General McAuliffe, responded with just one famous word, “NUTS.” He was confident that help was on the way and that a persistent patience, a grim determination to hold on, even while enduring great suffering, was the key to ultimate success.

The writer of the book of James knew that to be true as well. Writing to fellow believers throughout the Roman world, he told them to be patient until the Lord’s coming. Why did he feel compelled to utter these words of encouragement? There are two reasons. First, he knew that they, like him, were not going to have an easy time of it. They would face many difficulties and potentially a lot of suffering. On the one hand they were going to face opposition from their Jewish brethren. They considered Christianity to be a heretical religious movement within Judaism that needed to be expunged. There had already been martyrs like Stephen, who had paid with their lives for being a Christian. Furthermore, James knew that his own life was in danger. In fact, according to tradition, he would later be stoned to death because of his faith in Christ. Second, the Roman government barely tolerated upstart religious movements like Christianity. For example, one well respected Roman spokesman said that Christians were recruited from the “dregs of society” and that was one of the nicer things writers of that day said about them. On numerous occasions through the first three centuries following the birth of Christ, Christians were routinely persecuted, imprisoned and executed by the Roman government.

There was a second reason why James encouraged Christians to be persistently patient. He believed that help was on the way. Christ would soon return and establish His kingdom on earth. God’s people, therefore, should wait patiently until the time of His return. They might have to endure hardship and difficulties, including persecution, but they should not despair.

Christ would return and set things straight. In the meantime, James suggested that Christians should be like a farmer who waits until his crops mature. He realized that it takes time and patience and a lot of hard work before the crop is ready to be harvested. Furthermore, arguing and grumbling about how long it was taking for the crop to grow was useless. In fact, it was worse than useless. It would be like doubting Christ's return and would most certainly bring about a serious reprimand when Christ, the Lord of the harvest, did appear.

As they waited, James also suggested that they should be like the prophets. These men of God proclaimed the Word of the Lord. More often than not, their prophecies were rejected and sometimes they became the objects of ridicule and retaliation. Elijah had to hide in a cave. Amos was told to pack up his bags and go home. Jeremiah was thrown into a well. Others lost their lives as they spoke on behalf of the Lord. They were not only patient in the face of suffering, they were also persistent, tried and true, standing up for what was right without fear or hesitation.

Finally, James reminded those who read his letter of the example of Job. He was a well-known and admired patriarch of God's people. Everyone had heard the story of Job in the Old Testament. In fact, even to this day, almost everyone has at least a rudimentary understanding of this man's life. If nothing else, they have heard the often quoted phrase, "the patience of Job." Yes, Job was patient. According to the Old Testament account of his life, he endured the loss of lands, flocks, the lives of his children and even his own health. In all of this he was patient, but not in the way that most people would recognize. He didn't just quietly sit back and fold his hands, patiently waiting to see what other calamities might come his way. He forcefully rejected the worthless explanations of his visitors as to why he had suffered so much calamity. Furthermore he had the audacity to demand the right to inquire of the Lord as to why all of this misfortune had come his way. He was patient, but it was a persistent patience, an unyielding determination to trust in the Lord no matter what happened. He himself declared, "Though He (the Lord) slay me, yet will I trust in Him" (Job 13:15). His patience, even in the face of great suffering, was rooted in his abiding faith in God. The Lord would take care of him and if you know how this Old Testament book concludes, you know that Job was vindicated. Just as James says, "The Lord is full of compassion and mercy" (James 5:11). Everything was restored in abundance to Job, even a great multitude of children.

So what, if anything does this brief passage of Scripture in the letter of James have to say to us today. May I suggest a number of things. **First, Christ will return and perhaps sooner than we think.** Throughout the New Testament, there are multitudes of references to the second coming of Christ—the Gospels, the letters of Paul and Peter and the book of Revelation. It is a predominate theme. Consequently, down through the centuries there have been many predictions of His return. On various occasions people have

anxiously awaited His return only to be disappointed. However, they may have failed to consider something that is recorded in Matthew 24:14, "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come." Only with the dawn of the twenty-first century has that become a possibility with the advent of so many advanced forms of communication. All of the other requirements that Jesus gave for His return have been satisfied. Nothing, therefore, stands in the way of His second coming. That's something that deserves our attention.

Second, as the day of Christ's return approaches, the world will become an increasingly hostile environment for Christians. During the 1800's there was a common belief that the world was becoming a better and better place, especially in terms of the advancement of Christianity. Missionaries were volunteering to go to the four corners of the globe to share the Gospel, from the darkest jungles of Africa to the ice capped glaciers of Greenland, from the mighty rivers of India to the ancient cities of China. There was the expectation that soon the whole world would embrace Christianity. The twentieth century destroyed all of that overwrought enthusiasm. Two world wars, the birth of communism, the resurgence of Islam and the emergence of an atheistic secular humanism in western culture joined forces to become the enemies of Christianity. No longer are the teachings of Christ admired and pursued. Now as we approach the end of the first quarter of the twenty-first century, those who trust their lives to Christ are increasingly in peril across the globe and increasingly right here in America. Once again the old days of persecution in the Roman Empire are rearing their ugly heads and the warnings of that first century are becoming a revisited reality. As Jesus said, "All men will hate you because of Me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Mark 13:13).

All of which brings me to this final point. **Until Christ returns, we must be persistently and faithfully patient, standing firmly upon the rock of our salvation, the Lord Jesus Christ.** This is not the kind of patience that waits for something to happen, but rather the kind of patience that is preparing for what will happen, the kind of patience that is laboring for the Lord, even as the days grow darker and the enemy draws nearer. It is the kind of patience that those soldiers possessed during those bitterly cold days in December of 1944, holding on with grim determination in the sure expectation that help was on the way. Like them and their commanding officer, General McAuliffe, let us respond with one voice to those who would demand our surrender as Christians, "NUTS."