

The Purpose of the Lord **James 5:9-12**

Introduction

James' letter is a call to patience and steadfast joy amidst various trials. God brings forth fruit in His children by means of testing, like a refiner purging out the dross from precious metals. We need regular reminders of this because we easily get lost in the pain and confusion of our trials (large or small). We often do not see what God is up to, but by faith we can trust Him as He works in us. At first glance, this next passage in James seems rather disjointed. However, it fits well with these overall themes. Again, James calls Christians to submit themselves to the Lord and His purpose.

Walk Through the Text

We can see a clear parallel between this passage and the opening of the letter, which helps us understand the logic of this passage. Christians are to count it all joy in their trials, and this would include not grumbling against one another (1:2, 5:9). We are to do this knowing that patience is the product of testing, just as we know from the stories of the prophets (1:3, 5:10). Patience works in us to a maturing end, where we lack nothing, having learned to seek wisdom from the Lord. And we know this blessing is true from stories like that of Job who did endure and saw the Lord's purpose (1:4-5, 5:11). But, if we doubt God, we are double-minded and unstable, similar to when we neglect to patiently wait and trust God when it seems like it would be better to go back on our word (1:6-8, 5:12).

The Standard of Judgment

Remember that James has just rebuked those who are persecuting the church (5:1-6) and encouraged those under persecution to remain steadfast (5:7-8). One of the temptations we all face when we are under trials and testing is to turn our "groanings" on one another (v. 9). It is true that we will be offended. We will be treated unjustly or unkindly. We may not, however, react in kind, because by the standard with which we judge, we will be judged (Matt. 7:1ff). It makes most sense to see that James has in mind particularly the coming of the Lord in the previous verses as referring to the judgment on Jerusalem in AD 70. Yet, Christians ought not to look for this vindication and deliverance of the Lord's people while harboring their own sin against Him and His people. He is our Judge as well. Who is there among us that has not treated a brother unkindly or unjustly? We should be swift, particularly among brothers and sisters in Christ, to bear with one another in love (Col. 3:13, Eph. 4:2) and let love cover a multitude of sins (1 Pet. 4:8). This is no less true when we are under the pressure of trials.

Related to this, James makes another strong statement about our words (v. 12; cf. 1:19, 3:2ff). There are various interpretations for why James highlights this exhortation with, "above all." At the least, there is a real sense that you are what you say. In the face of persecutions and trials, James wants his readers to be sure that they bear the name of God faithfully, not in vain. "[I]t is not coarse or vulgar speech he prohibits but invoking God's name to guarantee the reliability of what a person says" (Moo). Calvin points out that it was a practice to swear by heaven or earth and to excuse it by saying that it was not a profane oath by invoking the name of God. But heaven is His throne, and earth is His footstool, and

so you cannot avoid profanity by swearing on things God has made (cf. Matt. 5:34, Matt. 23:16-22). Men will excuse breaking their word because they did not invoke God's name. But we serve a God who speaks, who is the Word, and He has made us to imitate Him. Our words matter, and we are fools and blind if we think that we can make any oath and God not hold us to it. There may be times where an oath is appropriate (e.g., Deut. 6:13, 23:21-23; Gal. 1:20; Heb. 3:11), but we may not work around keeping our word by inventing some ranking of oaths and then excusing ourselves. This is related to the theme of being patient. Christians ought to be people whose words are trustworthy because we trust the Lord, even when circumstances incline us to change (Ps. 15:4b). We should pray for wisdom instead of being double-minded, or in this case, double-tongued, lest we fall under God's judgment (cf. Matt. 12:37). Often, being true to your word is the fruit of trusting God.

Enduring

So, in the middle of this passage, James calls attention to those that have trusted God and endured as examples of suffering and patience. The prophets were chosen and approved by God to speak His holy words (e.g., Jer. 1:5-8), yet they endured many miseries (cf. Heb. 11:35-38). God did not determine that as His representatives they should be immediately free from all affliction. And yet, these faithful endured because they trusted the One who had called them. James also appeals to the example of Job. Submitting to God is not a stoic, emotionless, "let the chips fall" sort of submission. As in many of the Psalms, Job pleads and argues and wrestles with God, sometimes in a way that is very uncomfortable (e.g., Job 16:11-17). In the end of the book, God reveals Himself to Job. We are not told how Job dealt with or felt about his losses after this. We are told that God accepted him, saying Job spoke rightly of God, and restored and blessed him (Job 42:7ff). In Job's sufferings, he sought an answer, and he received God Himself, and this seems to satisfy everything. Suffering faithfully does not mean that we will understand the "why" now, but we will see that the Lord is compassionate and merciful. God's purpose in the trials is to make His own perfect and complete, lacking nothing, as He draws them to Himself.

James reminds us that we have seen this in others. So too, your suffering is not the end of the story, nor is it the final goal. God works all things together for good for those who love Him (Rom. 8:28). We, in our present conditions, cannot and should not expect to see where it all is headed. But by faith we know there is purpose and that it is good. In fact, in the end, you will be called blessed because the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

Conclusion

James suggests that we consider and remember God's purpose as we evaluate our sufferings. And here, believing the gospel makes all the difference. What was God's purpose in sending His Son to take on human flesh and suffer and die on the cross? His purpose was the salvation of the world. If He accomplishes this end, this purpose, by means of the cross, can you trust Him with the cross He has given you to bear? Jesus said and continues to say, "Pick up your cross daily, and *follow Me.*" And so, we pick up our cross, and we ask, "Ok, Jesus, where are we going?" And He says, "Wait patiently. You will see. But for now, follow Me."