



LIFE IN THE WAITING ROOM

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How long, O Lord? How long to sing this song? That has been the cry of God's people for generations. If you didn't recognize the song this morning, it's a U2 song that Bono wrote back in the 80s. I always think it's fitting to bring Bono into a sermon whenever I can, but it's especially appropriate for our study on James. Bono has been all over the globe addressing churches and religious leaders about the need to act on our faith on behalf of the poor and the countless people dying of AIDS in Africa. He repeatedly points out the need for Christians to demonstrate their belief through action.

That's exactly what James has been saying. In his incredibly practical way, he has shown us over and over again how our faith should be visible in our lives.

Some of you may not have heard that the Peabodies are now pet owners. We've inherited a guinea pig named Jose from the Summerfields. If you're looking for a low maintenance starter pet, guinea pigs are the way to go. They're quiet, they don't run around a whole lot, and they don't make much of a mess. Jose has helped me not have to buy a dog, so we're getting to be good friends.

But Jose is bit of a fraidy pig. He startles easily. And when you go to reach in his cage to pick him up, he shoots as fast as he can to the other corner. He keeps trying to avoid you every time you touch him. It's silly, because we're usually wanting to take him out for a good reason, either to give him a carrot or let him play for a bit. But he still tries to squirm away as long as possible.

I know how he feels. Every time James starts to speak about a new subject, it feels like he's coming right for me. He's reaching into my little world and I'm hoping I can avoid being cornered, that I won't have to deal with him for myself. But James has a way of getting a hold of me, and it ends up always being a good thing. He is freeing us from our cages, helping us get to a better spot.

His hands are reaching into our lives again this morning.

James 5:7-11

Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming.

See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop (precious fruit) and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains.

You too, be patient and stand firm (set your hearts), because the Lord's coming is near.

Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, 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.

You may hear echoes of an earlier message from James, when we looked at trials and endurance. Endurance, or the lack of it, has been on my mind this week. I've been trying to ease back into jogging, and I've been finding that I start sucking wind pretty quickly. My legs get tired and my heart feels like it's going to pound its way out of my chest. But I'm running a little further each time, hoping to build up more stamina as I go. Soon I'm hoping to make it to the end of the driveway...Endurance is that ability to keep going, to not buckle under the pressure or the hardship. Or lack of oxygen.

As I said, we talked about endurance and trials earlier in this series, so we're not going to dwell on that so much this morning. It is part of what James is talking about here, but his focus is really in a different place. Two ideas take center stage: Patience and the Lord's return.

Patience is a different character quality than endurance. The two often show up together, but they're not the same. Mind you, I don't think I'm doing all that much better in the patience department than I am with endurance. But they're separate concepts. Patience isn't about strength and gutting it out. Patience is much more about showing restraint.

You may recall back in 2002 when President Bush said, "I'm a patient man, and when I say I'm a patient man, I mean I'm a patient man." The tone in which he said it indicated he was actually feeling a bit impatient, as he voiced his disapproval of Saddam. And his patience came to an end a few months later when the war began. But be that as it may, his use of the term patient had to do with restraint – he was saying he was holding off acting, even though he wanted to. That's what patience is: keeping yourself in check, even when you're provoked. It is an ability to wait for the right timing.

Do you struggle with patience? We live in a world that doesn't encourage it. We can't wait for our popcorn, so we microwave it. We can't wait for a dial up connection on the computer, so we get a broadband Internet connection. We don't have time to wait for the car ahead of us to exit, so we get into the other lane and pass them. We don't have time for a sit down meal, so we grab fast food. We choose overnight shipping so we won't

have to wait a whole week for things to arrive. Everything is working toward acceleration – how can we get what we want faster?

James says that's not how it works with God. He says we need to learn patience. Some things can't be rushed. And that's hard. Especially when we're going through extremely difficult times. We say "How long, O Lord? How long to sing this same tired song? How long will I have to put up with this? How long will I be in this pain? How long will you wait before you step in and help me? How long until things get easier?"

The entire conversation about patience is framed in the context of Jesus coming back. For James, the reality of Christ returning to earth was just as certain as his death and resurrection. So what role did that play in the discussion about patience and what does it have to do with our lives so much later? We're still here, a couple millennia later, singing "How long, Lord?" Is it much of a motivator to talk about Jesus coming back when the years have kept rolling by? How does that help us be patient today?

The Need for Patience

Let's start by looking at the need for patience. You've probably heard somebody say, "Don't ask God for patience. He might give it to you." Meaning, of course, that patience is one of those virtues that is cultivated through difficulty. You can't practice being patient unless there's something that would normally make you impatient. Four key areas of life stand out in Scripture where patience is needed. The first is

Patience with our circumstances

Remember what James had to say to the rich people last week, about how they were not paying their workers? One group of his readers was the workers -- suffering under the oppression of those rich folk. They were wanting a change in the situation, wanting to see some justice brought their way. And James tells them "Be patient. Jesus is coming."

Some scholars believe that James was fending off some type of revolt, that people were restless and looking for change. They had cause to be angry and upset with the system. But James knew that the solution they were thinking about in their minds wouldn't bring about what they wanted so desperately. Only Jesus could do that.

So he points them to the example of the prophets who showed patience through all kinds of hardships. Prophets like Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, who was being chased down by the people he was trying to help. Prophets like Daniel, who was uprooted from his home and who was thrown in the lion's den. Prophets like Hosea, who had a miserable marriage that God turned into a living illustration of the message Hosea had to preach.

James says it is because they were patient that we consider them blessed, and he's right. Imagine if Daniel had been too afraid to be put in with the lions. He never would have experienced the miracle of God's protection and his story wouldn't have been the same. If Hosea had given up on his wife, he never would have shown us what God's undying love looks like.

Our situation isn't all that different in some ways. A difficult move, a bad job or a family crisis goes on for far too long, and we're ready to throw in the towel. But it is in those circumstances that we can experience some of the greatest blessings if we can discover how to have patience through them.

Patience with other people

Another area of patience is people. Let's be honest: Sometimes what tries our patience the most are the people around us. James recognized that when he wrote:

Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged.

That word for grumble is a complaining, eye rolling kind of word. It is not easy to be patient with other people. People can be so aggravating and irritating. Sometimes it's the ones you love the most who are best at pushing your buttons.

John Ortberg tells the story about the day he was getting his little daughter Mallory out of the bath. He was trying to get her dried off, but she was too busy running around in circles and singing a happy little song without words "dee dah...dee dah." He was getting irritated, and he said, "Mallory, hurry." So she sped up and started running faster. He said, "No Mallory, that's not what I mean. Stop with the dee dah stuff and get over here so we can dry you off. Hurry!"

She looked at him and asked, "Why?" And he didn't have an answer. He writes, "I had nowhere to go, nothing pressing to do. I was just so addicted to hurry, trapped in the rut of moving from one task to another. Here was life, here was joy, here was an invitation to dance right in front of me and I was missing it."

Our frustrations with other people often come because we have a plan in our head, an idea of how life should go, and that other person interrupts that plan. They interfere with the direction we're trying to head. We lose our patience because we see our goal slipping away. It could be a goal as simple as having five minutes by ourselves to read the paper. Or maybe it's to get through our email at work without someone coming in to talk to us. James calls us to have patience with those people who mess up our plans.

Patience with ourselves

When we see what's going on, that can result in us becoming frustrated with ourselves. For some of us, the real challenge isn't cutting other people slack – it's being patient with our own progress. We look at how long it takes us to learn certain lessons, how slow we are to change, and we become discouraged.

David felt that way sometimes:

Psalm 13:2

How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?

Sometimes I get so sick of myself – the way I think, the way I act, the way I feel. Can you relate to that? That’s a patience issue – learning to accept that my development is not going to be instant. James talks about the farmer patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains. He knew there needed to be several steps in the process.

The psalm writer says that God has compassion on us because he knows how we are formed. He knows what it takes to shape us and he knows what we are made of. If God is able to extend patience to us, then we need to have some patience for ourselves as well.

Patience with God

Beyond the circumstances and the people, it could be that we are most needing to have some patience for God himself. If we’re really honest with ourselves, we might admit that our biggest frustration is with him.

Maybe we don’t like God’s timing. He’s too slow for our taste. Maybe we don’t like his methods and we wish he would change the way he interacts with us. Maybe we want him to speak a little louder. We’re having such a hard time hearing his voice. So our complaint is with God.

The encouraging thing is that God doesn’t seem to have a problem with us questioning him about his timing. It’s quite eye opening to see how often David and the other writers of the Bible ask God when the waiting will be over. Here’s a sampling:

Psalm 6:3

My soul is in anguish. How long, O LORD, how long?

Psalm 13:1

*How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?*

Psalm 35:17

O Lord, how long will you look on?

Psalm 79:5

How long, O LORD? Will you be angry forever?

Psalm 119:84

How long must your servant wait?

Habakkuk 1:2

How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen?

It would seem, then, that God doesn’t mind being asked when he will intervene. We’re not alone if we’re feeling the need to be patient with God. It’s okay to ask, “Sovereign God, when?” That’s not impatience, because it is still leaving control in his hands. Our

impatience comes when we stop asking God “How long?” and start considering his silence as emotional proof that God doesn’t see or care about us.

So if that’s impatience, what does patience look like? How do I start to practice it in all the areas we’ve discussed? Is it the absence of activity? Is it sitting around, waiting? The dictionary defines patience as being passive. It’s putting your reactions on pause. But James suggests that there is more to it than that.

The shape of patience

The first thing I notice about patience is that

It’s prepared.

James says to be patient UNTIL the Lord’s coming. Later, he repeats that thought and says that Christ’s return is near. We don’t know when it will happen – we’re only told that we need to be prepared for when it does.

Anyone in the military knows what this is like. You don’t know when you might be deployed, or where. You just know it’s coming eventually. And in the meantime, you’re not just waiting for a call – you’re engaged in training exercises and planning so that if and when your orders come down, you can jump right into action.

It’s the same with waiting for Jesus. If we honestly believe he could come back at any time, how will that translate into our behavior? What kind of preparations will we make so that we’re ready whenever the time comes?

Sometimes, that means being in the right place at the right time. One night, Karin and I went out to eat. There was a long wait at the restaurant we chose, and they had those flashing beepers that tell you when they’re ready to seat you. We were fine to wait for a while, so we took the beeper and went across the parking lot to do a little shopping while we waited.

When we got back, it turns out we had missed our turn. We had gone outside the beeper’s range. It wasn’t that we weren’t patient – we just weren’t prepared and ready to go. We were unavailable when the time came.

That’s a second quality of this patience we’re talking about.

It’s available.

Mark 13:32-33

No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come.

You can complain all you want to about God being slow, but know this: Eventually, God is going to act. In his own timing, he will move and accomplish his purposes. When that

time comes, will you be prepared? How are we spending the time waiting for him to do something? We can grumble and gripe about how it's taking forever, or we can invest ourselves in doing everything within our power to be ready to jump on board with what God is doing when he does act.

Are we spending time with him so that we'll hear his voice? Are we guarding against sin creeping in, or are we wandering off "out of range" so we won't even be aware that the time we've been waiting for has arrived? Are we putting ourselves at his disposal, being completely available to him?

It's intentional.

James also shows that this patience is intentional

You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.

This English version translates it as "stand firm," but a more literal way to read it would be "establish your hearts," or "set your hearts". It's the same verb that was used to talk about when Jesus set his eyes on Jerusalem before his crucifixion. He was intent on going there, knowing what was ahead. He made a choice.

Patience takes choosing. Our hearts can wander a million different directions, and to choose to patiently wait for the Lord takes resolve and commitment.

It is not easy to be patient. It is not natural to be patient. It won't just happen accidentally. We have to set our minds and hearts to it. Because patience is really a form of impulse control. It requires enormous energy and focus.

Another thing about patience is that it is practical.

It's practical.

James says, "You want to know what patience looks like? Quit complaining about each other." That's about as hands on, down to earth, tangible kind of measure as you can come up with. Patience isn't just a theory.

Right in the middle of working on this sermon on patience, I had an irritating phone call with the bank. Something was messed up with my online banking and I couldn't access the account. This had been going on for two days. The first service person I got on the line started telling me that I needed to just wait for the bank to call me when it was fixed. That wasn't the answer I wanted, so I asked for a supervisor. So the second guy gets on, and he starts giving me answers without even knowing my account number, so I know he's not even really looking at my specific information. When he did finally get to the actual account, he couldn't give me an answer either. I could feel my frustration level rising. I said a short good bye. And just as I was hanging up, I went, "Oh...that was just a little test of my patience, wasn't it? How'd I do?" Not very well. Here I had spent the

day thinking about patience, but when it came right down to it, it wasn't getting through to my lifestyle.

Patience is practical. It's not an idea – it's a verb. It is meant to be seen in the way we treat one another.

One time Karin was attempting to have a quiet moment with the Lord to read her Bible and write in her journal and pray. But the kids were being so noisy she couldn't concentrate. So she stomped into the playroom and yelled, "Will you guys knock it off? I'm trying to have some DEVOTIONS!" She went back and sat down at the desk and picked up her little book of daily readings by Oswald Chambers and read these words:

Your god may be your little Christian habit, the habit of prayer at stated times, or the habit of Bible reading. Watch how your Father will upset those times...I can't do that just now, I am praying; it is my hour with God. No, it is your hour with your habit.

That hit home for Karin, because she saw that true spirituality had to go deeper than a regular Bible reading schedule. It needed to show up in patience toward the people who were interfering with that schedule. And sometimes we can justify impatience in the name of doing what God wants us to.

Ephesians 4:2

Be patient, bearing with one another in love.

James holds up Job as the ultimate example of patience for us. Here was a man who suffered so much, yet he still refused to give up on God. But here's what Job said:

Job 6:11

What strength do I have, that I should still hope? What prospects, that I should be patient?

He knew that a basic requirement of patience is a sense that there is hope. Because patience isn't simply waiting – it is waiting FOR something. That's where the return of Christ comes in. It gives us

The motivation of patience

The concept of Jesus coming back to earth was very real for the early church. The author John Blanchard went through and found that there are more than 300 references to it. That's one verse about Christ's return for every 13 verses in the New Testament. It is a staggering thought to realize just how completely engrained the idea was for them. That was the hope they clung to as they were beaten, imprisoned and killed for their faith.

We've talked before about how the idea has slipped out of Christian teaching. Enough time has gone by that for the most part, we don't really think of ourselves as waiting

anymore. And according to James, that means we have lost a major reason for being patient.

Because Jesus coming back represents so much about our faith. His physical return to earth will be his way of saying, “I have never forgotten you. I see your struggles. And I am coming back to make things right.”

Jesus coming back for us is at the center of our hope – the idea of being face to face with Jesus someday and having him put an end to suffering and pain and injustice. That’s when we’ll know Jesus as King of the universe. We will see him in all his glory. All our waiting has an end to it – which is Jesus himself.

When Job’s trials were over, here is what he had to say to God:

Job 42:5

*My ears had heard of you
but now my eyes have seen you.*

That’s the goal of patience – to see Jesus. Our ears have heard about him, but then we’re going to see him. We’ve done the best we can to love him from here on earth, but one day it will be face to face. One day all the answers will become clear. The curtain will be lifted, the smoke will clear and we will know and experience our God and Savior like we never have before.

And what we will find in that moment is that he is the one who has been patient. He is the one who has shown incredible restraint. He is the one who has exhibited the most self control – holding back judgment and anger when he could have unleashed it. Waiting to punish when we turned against him.

2 Peter 3:9

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

The things we have to be patient with pale in comparison to God’s infinite patience with us. I’m so glad James added the line he did at the end of his discussion of patience:

The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

That is what we discover in our patience. Even as we are waiting for final resolution, even as we are waiting to see Jesus face to face, we discover his compassion and mercy. In the middle of the hardship of waiting, we experience his grace. We’ll see it completely when Jesus gets back, but we have it here and now as well. His patience is what has carried us all along.

In the book of Revelation, when John has his vision of what heaven will be like, he sees the souls of all those who have been martyred. It’s not quite the end of time and they cry

out to God, “How long? How long O Lord, until you avenge our deaths?” God tells them, “Just a little longer.” Then he gives each of them a pure white robe.

To me, that’s a picture of how the Lord sustains us and gives us hope, even when the question “How long?” has yet to be answered. He wraps us up in a white robe. He purifies us and makes us into something clean and beautiful, and tells us to hold on just a little longer.

Paderewski was a famous Polish pianist. One evening, he was scheduled to give a concert. The audience had arrived and was seated quietly. If you’ve ever been to a classical music concert, you know that there’s a sort of unwritten expectation about how audience members will act.

But the long wait was too much for one nine year old boy. He got restless and impatient, and slipped away from his mom and made his way to the stage. Completely ignoring the crowd around him, he did what kids do when they see a piano. He sat down and started playing chopsticks.

The crowd was not pleased and started shouting for somebody to get the boy off the stage. Paderewski heard all the noise from the wings, and when he saw what was going on, he hurried to the piano. But instead of throwing the boy offstage, he reached both arms around him and started playing a second melody line along with him, improvising a beautiful duet. The whole time, Paderewski whispered in the boy’s ear, “Keep going...don’t quit...don’t stop.”

We move along in life, feeling impatient with God. We cry out, “How long? How long?” We lose our patience and move ahead. We go where we shouldn’t. We play the only little tune we know how. And God in his compassion and mercy wraps his patience around our impatience. He turns what we’re doing into beautiful music. And he whispers in our ear, “Keep going...Don’t stop.”

How long? A little longer. But Jesus will come back. It is as real as tomorrow and as sure as yesterday. And in the meantime, he will be patient with us until the very end. And that’s the motivation we need to keep going.