

DISCUSSION GUIDE :: SESSION 9

LIVING WHAT WE BELIEVE
SUPPORT FOR THOSE WHO SUFFER
JAMES 5:7-20
03/26/2017



MAIN POINT

The church is called to encourage broken people in the midst of impossible pain by bringing them into the presence of Jesus.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

If you could travel to one place that you've never been before, where would you go and why?

What is the most isolated place you have ever visited? What was that experience like?

The messiness of suffering is being tempted toward isolation. Pain puts us in the prison of feeling alone. How can the church stand with, lie down, or walk with wounded people under the weight of impossible moments? People will need more than a blind eye, a lecture, judgment, or pity. They need us there. They need our prayers. They need to be reminded that God is here and that their suffering is not for waste.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 5:7-12.

Why did James urge patience? What was happening to his readers?

Why is it hard to wait and be patient in the midst of suffering?

In James 5:7-11, James told his readers to be patient and wait on God. These believers were enduring prejudice and discrimination for being followers of Jesus, and some of them considered God slow to act in their defense. Some may have been dealing with grief over the imprisonment or deaths of loved ones. James wanted his readers to find the strength in Christ to endure and even to find joy in the midst of their suffering.

The first example James gave was that of a farmer waiting for his crop to grow. What can we learn from the farmer's patience that will help us be patient in difficult times?

James illustrated the concept of patient endurance by using the farmer. The farmer patiently anticipates the valuable crop because he has an investment in it. When the harvest comes, the patient toil will have been rewarded. Likewise when Christ appears, believers will know that their patient endurance in the face of suffering has been worth it.

Maintaining courage and faithful commitment because we know the Lord is coming soon keeps believers from sinking under the weight of suffering.

The second example James gave was that of Job. Why do you think James used Job as an example?

Read Job 42:10-17 and list Job's rewards for patience and faithfulness. How can Job's example be a comfort to us during difficult times? How can we develop perseverance?

James presented Job as a classic example of faithful endurance. Though Job complained, he never renounced God. God vindicated Job after he had endured many trials (see Job 42:12). At the end of verse 11, James reminds us of God's compassion and mercy, which affirm the deep tenderness of God's love toward us. That love doesn't change with our circumstances.

Describe a person you know who exemplifies godly, patient endurance under suffering. What have you learned from that individual?

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 5:13-18.

Why did James emphasize prayer in the spiritual life?

What is the purpose of prayer? How can prayer aid those who are suffering?

James used a series of questions followed by commands as an effective way of challenging his readers to prayer and worship. Prayers unite us with God and help us align ourselves with His will. We see this example from Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Read Mark 14:32-36. In this passage, we read about how Jesus set aside time to pray as He prepared for the cross, a suffering greater than any of us can imagine. What is the last big trial you faced? How did you feel about God during that experience, and what were your prayers like?

In verses 17-18, James gives his final example from Scripture of someone for his readers to imitate. What do we learn from the example of Elijah (see 1 Kings 17-18)?

As an example of a righteous man's powerful, effective prayers, James pointed to the prophet Elijah. The incident referred to is recorded in 1 Kings 17-18. James's point was that Elijah was human as we all are; yet because of his right relationship with God, his prayers were effective in God's causing and then ending drought. James urged believers to develop and maintain a vibrant relationship with God out of which they could pray effectively.

HAVE A FINAL VOLUNTEER READ JAMES 5:19-20.

In addition to prayer, what is another responsibility we have in each other's spiritual journeys, according to verses 19-20?

Have you ever strayed from your faith as a result of suffering you were going through? What happened to bring you back to God? How did He use other believers to help you return to Him?

Although we all want to endure suffering with joy and patience, sometimes that is not our reality, and our trials take a toll on us emotionally and spiritually. That's where our community comes in. James reminded his readers of the

significance of a restoration ministry. The restorer guides the wanderer back, not with a spirit of judgment but with love. One who restores sinners turns them away from death, a reference to physical death. Usually, wanderers do not need a lecture on how badly they have strayed. They already know. What they need is someone who will lovingly guide them back to the truth.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

What are some specific ways that we can help each other learn to be patient as we endure the trials of this life and wait for Jesus' return?

Why does it help to pray in groups when difficult times arise?

What task or problem are you facing that could benefit from intercessory prayer? What specific things can we pray for on your behalf? Pray for those things now.

PRAY

After you have prayed for any present sufferings, close by thanking God for the gift of community, other people to help us bear the burden of suffering and draw us back to His presence when we stray. Pray that your group would be a place where we are constantly praying for one another and encouraging one another on in patience and joy.

COMMENTARY

JAMES 5:7-20

5:7. In light of God's ultimate justice, James exhorted his brothers to be patient. The Greek term rendered be patient means "to be long-suffering," "to endure." Rather than to seek revenge for wrongs, we are to live in anticipation of the Lord's coming—Christ's return. An illustration from farming presses James's point. The farmer plows his field and sows his seed. He eagerly expects a crop of precious fruit, which he holds dear because of his toil and his dependence on it for survival. The early and the late rains refer to the promised land's two rainy periods. The early rains began during October and lasted for a couple of months, and the late rains began in February or March and also lasted a couple of months. These rains usually came gradually. The farmer sowed his seed when the early rains came and softened the earth. Then he anticipated the late rains to cause the grain to grow to maturity. Farmers depended on these crucial rains for crop production. Without them, people could face famine.

5:8. Believers are to follow the farmer's example of perseverance. In light of Christ's imminent return, we are to strengthen our hearts. We are to persevere in faith and renew our courage and commitment. Our phrase "just around the corner" captures the sense of the words is near. Living in light of Christ's return should give believers staying power, because at His return believers will be vindicated and the wicked oppressors will be judged.

5:9. The Greek term rendered complain means "to groan" or "to sigh" inwardly and then "to verbalize ill feelings toward someone." In this context it has the sense of blaming others for one's difficulties. James wanted believers to stop murmuring or grumbling against one another so they would not be judged. Again he echoed words of Jesus (Matt. 7:1-2). The word look calls attention to and emphasizes a strong warning: Jesus, the Judge, is on the threshold and is about to enter (see v. 8). With the Judge so near, how can believers continue to grumble against and find fault with one another? Verse 9 does not mean Christians will face the same judgment as the wicked (vv. 1-6). Instead, believers will be judged on the basis of their relationship with Christ, and the wicked will be judged on the basis of their lack of a relationship with Him.

5:10. James pointed believers to the prophets as a group for an outstanding example of suffering and patience. The Greek noun translated example comes from a verb that means "to copy under." It refers to students' receiving copies of correctly formed letters to use in honing their writing skill. They practiced writing the alphabet under these excellent models. James referred to Hebrew prophets as models of perseverance. Jewish believers would mentally review their

history for prophets such as Jeremiah who were persecuted but endured. The prophets persevered under pressure; thus, they were worthy examples of steadfastness.

5:11. See calls attention to James's emphasis. Those who endured were worthy of congratulations and praise. The word for endured is different from the term for "patience" in verses 7-8 that also has the element of endurance. The word in verse 11 conveys the sense of bearing up under a load without collapsing and of taking blows and having the strength to strike back.

These believers had heard of Job's endurance, perhaps in synagogue settings in which Job was presented as an example of perseverance. He was not patient in our usual meaning of the word; he "had it out" with God, but he remained steadfast in his faith. We know the outcome from the Lord for Job—the vindication God provided. That God restored Job demonstrates He is very compassionate and merciful. The Greek word rendered very compassionate means "full of pity or of tender affections." It conveys great kindness. The term merciful has the idea of being moved by another's suffering. We can count on God's active kindness and empathy as we endure hardships.

5:13. James then asked three questions that expected a yes answer. First, are any believers suffering? The word suffering refers to experiencing hardships or troubles. That person should keep on praying for God's help. Second, is anyone cheerful ("in good spirits")? That person should sing praises—literally, "sing psalms." The Greek word used here originally meant "to play on a stringed instrument." Singing to God is a fitting way to thank Him for blessings.

5:14. James's third question concerns believers who are sick. The Greek term for sick means "to lack strength," thus "to be in ill health." The verb's present tense indicates a continuous state of sickness. A person this ill may have lacked the strength to pray, so the individual was to call for the elders of the church. Elders may have been older, respected Christians, or they could have been leaders with pastoral functions. The elders' role probably mirrors a similar role found in the Jewish community, and James's advice reflects a familiar practice in that community.

The elders first were to anoint the sick person with olive oil in the name of the Lord. Interpreters have offered two views concerning this instruction: (1) The word anoint means more than using olive oil in a ceremonial gesture; it means "to rub" in the medicinal sense. Thus prayer is to be combined with the best medical treatment available. The phrase in the name of the Lord emphasizes dependence on God. (2) James used the term "anoint" in a ceremonial sense to represent God's presence and healing power. In this view, the phrase "in the name of the Lord" makes James's prescribed rite a religious one.

5:15. On the surface this verse seems to offer an absolute guarantee that the elders' gathering around, anointing the sick person with oil, and praying (even as the patient prayed) would always result in healing. Most likely, however, we must consider an underlying condition. The phrase the prayer of faith refers to petitioning God in total confidence. The phrase will save translates a Greek word that means "will cure" or "will restore to health." So the sick person would be healed. The Lord would raise him up from the sickbed and "put him on his feet again." The implied condition is "if the Lord wills." James's comment, If he has committed sins, does not indicate all sickness is a result of sins. It emphasizes that where sin is present, God's forgiveness is available. The prayer of trust in God's willingness to forgive results in the sins' being removed. What about critically ill believers who are not healed? Faith in a kind, loving Heavenly Father bows to His will and entrusts believers who die to His eternal care.

5:16. Here, James may have referred to sins directly related to illnesses. Sick believers need to confess their sins specifically, honestly, and openly to one another. Confession, however, should be made to trusted Christian friends, who then can be asked to pray for the sick. James wrote, The intense prayer of the righteous is very powerful. A righteous person has a close relationship with God and demonstrates faith through obedience. The idea is that God hears and makes effective the prayers of His faithful people. Thus, His people are to pray.

5:17-20. James cited a biblical personality, Elijah, who prayed effectively. The illustration is intended to encourage his audience that their prayers could lead to similar results. James turned to the priority of reclaiming those who had strayed from the faith. Someone turns and whoever turns both reflect an effort to bring a straying believer back to an authentic Christian faith and lifestyle.

READING ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK

James 5:13-18