

Today we come to the final chapter in our look at the letter of James. I think it would be very helpful if you could open your pew bibles at page 228 of the New Testament section so you can read simultaneously the various verses I will be quoting.

Let's start at the very first verse:

“Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth eaten”. And verse 16: “Confess your sins to one another; the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective”.

Put the two together, and it's like lighting the blue touch paper; on bonfire night - stand back ready for the explosion.

Maybe one day I'll talk about that heady mix, but today I want to conclude our series on James by concentrating on the middle section where we learn all about patience.

Growing up I was taught that patience was a virtue; my halo shone so brightly at times my sisters took to wearing sunglasses but somehow, somewhere along the line I became just like the rest of my friends. Impatient.

Yes, I was impatient.

I couldn't wait for the school bell to ring at the end of the last lesson; I couldn't wait till I passed my driving test and I couldn't wait till I would earn my first pay packet. Slowly it dawned on me that whilst patience might be a virtue it is also a quality called upon consistently in everyday life; we have to wait at traffic lights in the middle of the night when there's not another car in sight; we have to wait in line at the check out; even the doctors surgery has a waiting room.

1

And we wait without realizing it even when we enjoy ourselves. I love going out to eat; to Michelin starred restaurants if Jane is paying or Pizza Express if I am, but no matter how posh or expensive the restaurant might be they keep you waiting at least five times each and every time you dine there:

You wait to be seated; you wait to place your order; you wait for your food to be served; you wait for your bill to arrive and then you even have to wait till they go back and get the machine to insert your credit card after you've checked the bill. No wonder the person who serves you is called a waiter!

So today, in this letter from James, I want to look at three aspects of patience by asking the questions:

2

1. When should I wait?
2. Why should I wait?
3. How should I wait?

1. When should I wait?

The bible has a lot to say about patience; there are over 30 instances that speak specifically about being patient but I think there are two occasions when the circumstances demand it:

- i. When circumstances are beyond our control.

What is your reaction to the tannoy announcement that your holiday flight is delayed; or when you see the motorway sign saying slow down congestion ahead. Anger, frustration or more probably you start to worry about it. We seem to think that somehow by worrying we can fix the situation.

In verse 7 James tells us the answer to the situation where events are beyond our control is to be patient and he uses the example of the farmer to illustrate his point. Farmers need lots of patience; indeed my own brother in law is a farmer and he says it's part of the job description.

He has to wait until the time is right to till the soil; wait to plant the seed; wait to harvest it; wait to take it to market. Yet throughout that period of time there are factors totally outside of his control, particularly the vagaries of the English weather: rain, heat, flood, drought, frost and you don't have to be a farmer to experience things that are beyond our control.

It's no one's fault – stuff happens. There's no point whatsoever in worrying; worry won't make the plane be ready quicker or make the cars in front move more freely - but there is an alternative to worrying - we can place our trust in God to take care of it. James is telling us that if there are circumstances beyond our control then turn the matter over to God and trust Him to take care of it.

ii. Secondly, patience is essential when situations or problems can not be explained

James give us the greatest example in the Bible of having patience when he reminds us of the endurance of Job in verse 11.

Very briefly, the story of Job is that he was one of the world's wealthiest men; his cattle alone had an equivalent modern day value of £15 million and in one day he lost them all along with every single possession he owned.

He had 10 children and one day they were feasting in the oldest son's house when a fierce storm hit the house and all were killed. Then his health broke to the extent that he was covered from head to toe in festering boils. I think the worst part was that Job had no clue why he was suffering, why it should be him and not someone else.

Just in case you don't know, let me put your mind at rest, God blesses Job and restores him to full health and prosperity and he fathers a further ten children and dies many years later far richer and happier than he ever was. But the relevant point here is that throughout all Job's torment and troubles he never once turned his back on God; his faith enabled him to endure.

There are times when life does not seem fair; ask anyone who has watched a love one die. Why do bad things always seem to happen to good people? A lot of things in life just don't make sense; we can not give an explanation and it is at such times, says James that we have to be patient.

2. So why should I wait?

In verse 17 James offers up the example of Elijah. The full story of Elijah is told in 1 and 2 Kings in the Old Testament and I would urge you to read it later. At one point, Elijah is so dispirited and at his wits end trying to flee those sent to kill him and he lays down exhausted under a juniper tree and says “It is enough, now oh Lord, take away my life.”

Elijah is overwhelmed, isolated and alone yet from the depths of his despair God's angels appear and feed him water and food for his physical recovery whilst patience feeds his spiritual revitalization.

God has promised that no matter how bad things might be in the present moment, we have his absolute assurance that in the new creation every tear will be wiped away and that death, mourning, crying and pain will be no more.

Neither Job nor Elijah would have known those words would be prophesied by John in his Revelation, the final book in our bible, but had they done so they would have understood: God is in control; God's plan is being worked out and will come to fruition.

That is our reward for being believers and followers of Christ. God has made the invitation for us to join him in eternal life, our challenge is to learn how to be patient; to await that unknown moment in time when Christ returns on judgement day. And being English we should be one step ahead of most of the world because we are renowned for our ability in forming orderly queues.

3. Finally, how should I wait?

Let's go back to the analogy of the farmer. He doesn't just sit around in between tilling, sowing and harvest time waiting for each event to happen; no he does a thousand and one things in between to ensure that when harvest time comes it will go as smoothly as possible.

In just the same way, as we have shown during this sermon series, there is more to being a Christian than just coming to a church service once a week. We are called to live out our faith, to put it into action; indeed to give life to our faith.

We often refer to living in the now but not yet so waiting patiently in expectation is one good way of how to wait.

And we should also wait quietly. James says in verse 9 that we should not grumble against one another. When problems come our way we so easily look for a scapegoat; try to blame someone else.

And if we don't start blaming we usually start complaining or even worse, we start blaming and complaining at the same time. I can see from the look on some of your faces that you know exactly what I mean.

The story is told of the old woman who complained and moaned to and about her husband all the time – constantly complaining and constantly moaning but when the husband died she put on his headstone “Rest in Peace”.

Later that day the family solicitor read out the husband's will and the wife found out she'd been left £100 and the rest of his estate to a neighbour. She immediately went back and had the inscription on the headstone changed. Along with the words “Rest in Peace” she added “Till we meet again”.

I have often told you that my favourite bible verse is from 1 John: “God is love”. Love is the greatest gift that we receive from God. And I think it is no coincidence when St Paul describes what love is in his first letter to the Corinthians that the very first quality he lists is patience.

James tells us we should be patient like a farmer when we find ourselves in circumstances beyond our control and we should have the patience of Job when we find ourselves in situations which can not be explained.

James also tells us why we should be patient because no matter how bad things might be in any given moment we have Christ's absolute promise that in the new creation every tear will be wiped away.

Finally James tells us we must be gentle and hard working in our patient wait till all believers meet again.

Well until we meet again, let me close by sharing with you the words of St Francis of Assisi. He said “Where there is patience and humility, there is neither anger nor vexation”.

What a peaceful world that would be. My prayer is that one day, somehow, those words will be heard and resound throughout the troubled world we live in and until then, well I suppose we must all be patient; as patient as Job an, as patient as Elijah.