

Part Eleven: How to Handle Opposition

Written by Bob Stone

James 5:7-12

A wide spectrum of conditions exist among believers today.

Some are being oppressed or opposed by another and experiencing suffering because of it.

- domestic conflicts with parents, children
- relatives who take advantage of us
- friends who turn against us
- neighbors who make unjust accusations
- bad working conditions
- poverty.

What do we do when we are being mistreated and feel we have no options? Some of us will have a natural tendency to fight back (to return evil for evil), and some of us will find ourselves powerless to do anything but hold a grudge and become bitter and unhappy people. There is, however, a better approach.

Like the prophet Isaiah, some believers still have their focus on God while in the midst of suffering, thus patiently speak the truth with confidence that God will ultimately intervene in their lives. They don't allow suffering to destroy them, but to build them and ultimately bring them a blessing.

Another description of these two approaches to suffering and trials is found in James 5:1-12.

Last week we looked at vv. 1-6 and pointed out that vv. 1-12 are written to specific people. The audience is made up of three groups:

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- the oppressor
- the oppressed
- the observer

Last week we observed the oppressor. The first 6 verses of chapter 5 declare to the oppressor that immediate justice and ultimate judgment, sure and complete, is going to come upon him. What will happen to the one who is unjustly suffering? Verses 7-12 have some vital instruction for the oppressed and opposed.

Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, 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. Above all, my brothers, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your "Yes" be yes, and your "No," no, or you will be condemned.

The examination of the context

It is helpful to see these 7 verses in their context. As we look closely, we note a number of observations.

1. The verses are addressed to believers. The word brother(s) is used 4 times here; it is obvious he is talking to those who know Christ.
2. It is also obvious that the verses are directly related to the preceding 6 verses. The word "then" in v. 7 implies he has turned his attention from those who are oppressors, to those who are opposed. In other words, "having said what I said to the rich, now I want to talk to you who are being unjustly treated."
3. The final observation is that James' exhortation in these verses will be made up of four commands: two positive and two negative.

The exhortation

All of us have an enemy at some time in our lives—someone committed to our social, physical, or spiritual destruction. Whatever their motive, it is normal in life to have someone who is out to get us. What should be our response to such opposition? James gives us at least 4 responses when we are facing opposition and suffering:

Be patient, wait and persevere.

vv. 7-8—*"Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. 8] You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near."*

This thought of waiting is maddening for most Americans. Most of us have no reference point for, or experience at, waiting—we never wait. We can always do something. We say, "Don't take it." "Fight back." "Leave if you're not happy." "Protest." Yet this instruction tells us to wait for something.

It's not enduring without hope but waiting with hope—the hope of the Lord's coming. It's waiting for someone who has the solution—someone who will bring help. If we have to wait, it makes all the difference if we wait with a sure hope. This is not only a reference to the second coming of Christ, but in a practical sense, waiting for His appearance on the scene when we're in trouble.

How are we to wait? James tells us we are to be patient in our waiting. "Patient" comes from a combination of two Greek words. The first one means "far, distant, long;" the second means "passion, heat, rage, anger." Together they produce the thought of being "long-tempered." In other words, James tells his oppressed, opposed and suffering readers to be long-tempered until the Lord's presence and a solution is seen. In other words: look up, put your circumstances in God's hands and His eternal perspective, and endure it.

In case James' readers still don't get what is being called for, he gives them an everyday example they can all understand—he tells them to look at the farmer. v. 7b—*"See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains."*

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Agriculture is great training for life. If you do not have that background, you should take the time to study the work of a dirt farmer, orchardist, or gardener. (Truth is often best understood when it is illustrated in creation, or in the life of another person. James uses this technique over and over again throughout his book, with reference to creation and people.) Here in James, the farmer helps us understand the concept of waiting. For many, waiting means no activity, but to the farmer, waiting for valuable harvest implies weeding, pruning, spraying, thinning, watering, order supplies, repairing equipment, planning, managing, etc.

In other words, waiting and suffering does not imply inactivity but activity that enhances the valuable harvest to come. In our area, we don't understand the concept of waiting for rain. We have no appreciation for this. We can't wait for the rain to stop! The ancient Israeli farmer, however, understood "waiting for rain." The rocky, dry, crusty soil of Palestine challenged the farmer of the day. He had to rely on rain (not irrigation), with no date of its arrival.

The point is, the sufferer—the one who is opposed—may have to wait like the farmer before he/she gets relief, or finds a solution. But valuable solutions, e.g., crops and rain, are ahead for the patient believer.

Waiting, however, does not imply inactivity. We are to do whatever will prepare the way for our solution or relief. In addition to patient waiting, we are to:

Stand firm.

v. 8—*"You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near."* James says that in addition to patience, there is a need to stand firm in hard times of suffering and opposition. The tendency is to become discouraged and overcome by feelings of self-pity. There is a solution, however, and that is to stand firm.

What does it mean to stand firm? It means, to prop up and support something that is heavy. How do we do that?

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- Believe that the coming of the Lord is near—that will inspire hope and patience. This is not just waiting for the literal return of the Lord, but waiting until the Lord comes to our point of need and offers His harvest of blessings.
- Develop your inner life.

Don't grumble.

v. 9—*"Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!"*

Why would we grumble and fight amongst our fellow sufferers? Why is it we sometimes complain and grumble against those we love the most and are dependent upon? It is the same reason a father might come home from work after a tough day and yell at his wife and kids and kick the dog. He is frustrated with his day. We all have a tendency to vent our frustration on those around us, but James says "stop it!"

The word "grumble" conveys the idea of sighing, groaning—i.e., "bearing a grudge." We should stop it, not only because we are hurting those who are not the problem, but James reminds us that grumbling against each other gives occasion for us to be judged. "*The judge is standing at the door*"

—v. 9b. Think about it. When we strike out at those who are innocent, we should look up and see the judge standing at the door.

Don't swear and make extravagant promises to God and others.

v. 12—*"Above all, my brothers, do not swear—not by heaven or by earth or by anything else. Let your 'Yes' be yes, and your 'No,' no, or you will be condemned."*

Swearing here means to grasp something firmly or sacredly for the purpose of supporting what we are saying or doing. Think of what we often do in the midst of suffering. We make an oath and say, "Oh God, if you'll just get me out of this experience, I promise that I will serve you," or "in the name of all that is sacred I promise. . . ." It is easy in the midst of suffering to make an oath—a promise to God, that we can't or don't keep.

James tells us, however, that we should wait for what the Lord brings about (v. 11), and

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not try to speed the solution by making some promise. In other words, James is advocating that we not exaggerate our speech, but speak plainly. Nor should we piously invoke God's presence upon all we say.

"We should avoid appearing super-spiritual or exaggerate our speech. We must endure our trials with humility and simplicity"—Charles Swindoll.

The examples—vv. 10-11

To enforce his appeal for **patience**, James gives three examples in the following verses. Again we see the practice of putting truth into real life situations. Most of Scripture is written in a narrative form, i.e., stories so truth can not only be heard, but seen.

The Prophets—they spoke in the name of the Lord:

v. 10—*"Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord."* (Like Isaiah and others.) James reminds his readers that the prophets modeled patience in the midst of their suffering. While they persevered, however, they spoke in the name of the Lord. Instead of blaming their persecutors for their pain and treatment, they proclaimed God's Word to those who needed to hear.

While we wait for relief from our opposition and suffering, we should not cower in the corner in fear, but speak the truth to those who need to hear.

Job, the man who persevered under excruciating trials:

v. 11b—*"You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about."*

Why should we look at Job? What can he teach us? When we study the book, we hear not only the anguish of someone in suffering, but also some incorrect human solutions given for Job's problems by Job's friends. The book finally ends with God's perspective on suffering—how He superintended over Job's trials—Job 42:5-6. We learn a very valuable lesson about suffering. There is great blessing for those of us who persevere. Though we may not understand this during the pressure moments of the trial, God will see us through.

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The final example is the best of all.

The Lord:

v. 11c—“...*The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.*” We have seen what the Lord brought about in Job's life—v. 11b & c. James wraps it up with a description of why Job was so blessed—because of who the Lord is. He is full of compassion and mercy.

God is compassionate—large-hearted and full of mercy. He won't give us what we deserve, but will lavish on us His blessing. This brings us to a very important point. If we are not oppressing others, or not going through any oppression, suffering or opposition ourselves, what are we to do if we see this happening in others?

The observer

Looking back over vv. 1-12, I would like to make a number of observations to the observer.

First, remember not to be like Job's friends; be a good friend—vv. 7,11.

You remember how they all came with their pious insights to offer Job comfort and correction, but at the end of the book we see God was displeased with their observations. Therefore, when you see someone suffering, keep these things in mind:

1. Don't give quick answers.
2. *“Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry”*—James 1:19.
3. Don't just nod your head in agreement.
4. When it is appropriate, ask good questions—allow the sufferer to express his/her feelings.
5. If there is no overt sin involved in the sufferer's life, then wait along with them for the harvest and the rain, i.e., the Lord's blessing.

Second, help the oppressed to focus their attention on positive action during the suffering.

Help them to find positive action that will divert some of their attention away from the suffering, like the farmer who works while he waits for the harvest and rain.

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Remember, waiting doesn't mean inactivity. It means helping the oppressed do those things that will make way for the harvest:

- prayer
- study
- counsel

In the context of these verses, help them:

- to be patient
- to build up their sagging heart
- not to grumble
- nor to make promises they can't or won't keep

Remind them that trials always come to a positive resolution for the believer, but there is always a gap between the initial trial and the eventual outcome. What might the poor of vv. 1-6 do while they are suffering under intolerable economic conditions? In addition to what has already been mentioned, they might:

- manage and keep in good repair the little they have
- pool resources with others
- develop skills that might get them out of their condition
- partner with others in prayer for strength

Another thing the observer might do for the one who is in a painful trial is:

Third, help the sufferer to focus on the development of patience, perseverance and God's ultimate solution; and away from grumbling and blaming others for the trial—v. 9.

People in trials often need loyal friends who will not react to their statements, but help them refocus their attention on positive and healing action and character development.

Fourth, remind the sufferer/opposed of who the Lord is.

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v. 11b—*"You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy."* While listening to their emotions and concerns, help them to refocus their attention on God's character. This is exactly what Elijah needed when he was in the midst of trial and felt overwhelmed. He went to the mountain of God and had a fresh vision of Him. (See 1 Kings 19.)

Fifth, be an advocate and speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, but do it in a godly manner. vv. 1-6,10.

In order to do this, be aware that when you take up another person's cause, you may enter into suffering yourself. Notice how James spoke to the rich oppressors on behalf of those who were being oppressed by them. Also, notice how the prophets in v. 10 spoke in the name of the Lord in the face of suffering. Often a person who is down, distressed, or suffering doesn't have the energy or spiritual strength to speak the truth to others. Remember, however, if the Lord does lead us to speak for another, we should not do it with grumbling, but reflect the compassion and mercy of the Lord—the character of the Lord.

Don't misrepresent the Lord with harsh and uncaring words.

Conclusion

These verses point out how we need each other desperately in times of suffering, opposition, or oppression. It was never God's intention for us to face our trials alone.

1. Are you in over your head right now and need perspective and a helping hand?
2. Do you have the potential to offer that help and yet have been negligent in making yourself available?
3. What would it be like for you if you were in the circumstances described in these verses and no one helped?
4. What would it do for your faith?