

## Precious Suffering

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Today we are concluding James' letter, a letter that addresses a whole host of practical issues. It ends on a very personal and universal issue, suffering. Recent floods, global wars, Austin's poor, the Becton's babies, and with the holidays coming, family dysfunction. No one is immune to suffering. We all face it, and our friends face it, so *what* do we do with it? That's James primary focus; it's immensely practical. There's a lot he's not going to say, particularly the *why*, we've addressed it several times before. Here, James is addressing suffering in several key ways: What do we do with it, How to handle it, How to hope in it. Remember James' three focal images: 1) MIRROR: We'll look in it to see what we do with suffering 2) ARROW: How to persevere thru it 3) CROWN: How to hope in it.

### Mirror: What We Do With Suffering

James has created what we call an *inclusio*, it's a literary device that repeats at beginning and end to draw attention to something important, like bookends. In chapter 1, he begins with suffering and steadfastness: "[Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing](#)" (1:3). **Suffering is for steadfastness.** In chapter 5, he ends with suffering and steadfastness, pointing out examples of people who stand strong through adversity, which raises the question: How do we become steadfast? "[Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord.](#)" To stand strong (like Aragorn, waiting for the light on the third day, defending Helms Deep) we must patiently persevere. "[Be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble.](#)" Let's take a look in the mirror. There are two kinds of people, two kinds of sufferers here. First, the **impatient sufferer**. That's most of us. Americans are not particularly patient people. We groan if a webpage takes more than five seconds to load. If traffic backs up for even a few seconds we begin to complain. I start talking to it, to inanimate traffic! Speaking of talking, how about poor cell reception. Time to rip on the carriers. Impatience! *Patience is a rare virtue in a comfortable world.* This is part of James point in the first six verses. Living in luxury leads to entitlement and complaining. If the line at the grocery store is a few too many people long, there better be another line. We can't wait. But runs deeper. *Our impatience is a symptom of discontent.* Were flustered on the outside because we are discontent on the inside. We've come to believe that external comfort equals internal contentment. We demand deep happiness from shallow things. That's why we complain. It's also why suffering is a shock. We are so used to finding happiness in our circumstances that when our comforts are disturbed we have nowhere to go. Comfort blinds us to the ubiquitous nature of suffering. We expect everything to be rosy. [As a result we are insulated from the design of suffering.](#) We don't understand it. ON the other hand we have the **patient sufferer**, marked by contentment, committed to perseverance, rejoicing in trial. Instead of escaping through comfort, they engage suffering in Christ. This person has found a consistent joy deeper than circumstances, which transcends comfort. They have found a treasure that can't be measured or spent. It is always valuable no matter what's going on. External chaos, internal peace. They are steadfast, not easily buffeted by hard winds. Slow to complain quick to hold

on. What makes the difference between these two people? Their bottom-line. The bottom-line, the bedrock of their desires. The impatient sufferer lives in luxury and “[fattens your hearts in a day of slaughter](#)”. When a heart is fat, it slows down, it's prone to attack, it's easily slaughtered under stress. But the patient sufferer, James says, establishes his heart for the coming of the Lord. Establish means to strengthen fortify. A strong heart can run marathons. This person lives in contentment because the roots of their heart draw strength from life-rich soil. They have a better bottom-line, bedrock. My wife and I are learning first hand how foundations make a difference. The foundation to our home has a crack right through it. You can see it outside and inside. In fact, the crack has ripped through the house, splitting the tile in our kitchen and out to the side of the foundation. Bad foundations, like comfort, lead to a life that cracks under pressure. But if you have a solid foundation, you can endure a lot. Take a look at how they are building skyscrapers and hi-rise condos downtown. They don't begin with the walls or even a nice thick cement slab. They dig a massive hole in the ground to sink steel beams stories down into the ground. This makes the skyscraper strong. It's the foundation beneath that enables it to withstand high winds and not topple. Are you sinking the beams of your heart down into the soil of Christ or laying a shallow foundation in comfort? How do you know? Impatience. Suffering will show, starts as a hairline crack, but then rips right open.

### **Arrow: How to Get Thru It**

So, how do you do it, persevere? James: [Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains](#)” (7). How can we patiently persevere? Three ways: First, be patient **brothers**. We persevere not as isolated sufferers but as a connected community, a family. Austin and Caitlin Becton are in the hospital right now with their 19 week old twins in imminent danger of death. The night they checked in scores and scores of people reached out. Within 24 hours this church provided meals, showered them with love, wept and wept with them, held a prayer vigil, covered meals, and more. Now, people in this church have had equal if not greater suffering than the Becton's and not received this level of outpouring. Why did the Bectons receive so much? They have only been in our church one year. Why? *Because they invited us in from the very beginning*, Within weeks they shared their struggle to conceive, opened up in city groups and on Sundays, treating all of us like family. To patiently persevere we have to intimately invite people in our lives. For some of you it may be only a few, for others many, but in order to be steadfast you need help, you need encouragement, you need prayer, you need one another. Hold people at arms length and hold off your own perseverance. Becton's are exemplary and you are exemplary in how you have responded. To quote my wife, you are churching one another. Church as a verb, filled with love, transparency, and faith. The first way we patiently persevere by *suffering together*. The second way is explained by the **farmer** who waits for precious fruit by being patient for the early and late rains. Two-sided lesson from him. First **he knows suffering is worth it**. Notice what he's waiting for—precious fruit. For the first century farmer, the fruit was precious, valued, organically rich, succulent. The word is used elsewhere to refer to precious stones, priceless treasures (1 Cor 3:12; Rev 17:4). He knows its worth it the wait to get the fruit of his sufferings. To the one who persevere will be given the crown of life, the very favor and life of God forever. Are you looking at your comfort or

at Christ? The farmer has his valuables ordered, content with Christ he can await the discomfort of a difficult season or few seconds. He knows its worth it and **he knows the wait is essential**. He must wait for the rains. The early rains were essential to the germination of the seed and the late rains to its stalky growth and fruitfulness. Without these rains, the seed would not bear fruit, nourish, and feed others. It would become nothing. *The patient person uses their suffering*. They trust its design. The impatient person wants to accelerate this process, skip to another line, get another carrier. She adds growth hormones to the fruit, skipping the essential rains, and ends up with artificially bigger and less nutritious fruit. If you want the real fruit, you have to wait, go through the suffering, and come out precious. The word precious is also used to refer to the purification of gold. Gold in the raw isn't beautiful. It needs a furnace to shine. It has to go through the heat to come out precious, beautiful. Skip the process and you've just got ore. Speed up the growth and you miss the real fruit. *See, there's design in the suffering in the waiting*, a purified faith. It is worth it and its essential. **Steadfastness comes through suffering**. The question, of course, is what's worth it in real life? We will get to that. But I want to address the objection: Are you saying I'm not supposed to ever weep, or complain, or cry out when suffering? That sounds impossible, even stoic and a denial of reality. James has an answer for that: "[As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.](#)" God holds up imperfect men as examples of patient suffering. Job was steadfast, he endured through a lot, clung to God but he also complained, wept, cried out, and longed for the grave. When suffering hits, God the Father knows we need emotional latitude. We need space to be human, to feel, to weep, to contemplate our loss, just like his Son Jesus did. Your heavenly father knows, and he knows you need space to be human, but he also knows you need more than that, you need, like Job the flame of faith to burn brightly in the darkness. You need **hope** in your suffering.

### **Crown: How to Hope in It**

What is so compelling, so precious, that it is worth the suffering? [Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord.](#)" James repeats it twice. The coming of the Lord. This the precious treasure that triggers perseverance. What is it? The coming of the Lord is the return of Christ to consummate his kingdom on earth described in Matthew 24:27, 30 "[For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man...they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.](#)" The return of Christ is *imminent*—it could happen at anytime, which means there is an urgency to our perseverance to faith in Christ and not in comfort. To the one who perseveres will be given the crown of life. The return of Christ is *definite*—you can count on him bringing his divine force and power to put all things right, to put an end to all suffering, to wipe every tear. Finally, the coming of the Lord is *brilliant*—so brilliant that his coming will be like eye-catching fire in the sky that stretches from east to west. His brilliance, his glory, his beauty will be so great that it can be seen from anywhere on the planet. Embodied glory, grace, beauty, truth, and love. What we all long for, the eternal treasure of Christ himself will eclipse our momentary suffering in an eternal brilliance like none has ever seen. Imminent, definite, and brilliant the coming of the Lord is motivates



patient suffering, because we know its worth it. Patient or impatient sufferer. Comfort of contentment. Look to his coming, imminent, definite, and brilliant! The coming of the Lord!