

When You're Feeling Low

James 5:7–11

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Bellevue Baptist Church

Open your Bible to James 5. Today, we come to the final passage in our study in this practical book.

Let me tell you what we are about to read. Here's what James is trying to do as he wraps up this letter. Do you have any friends wrestling with depression, walking through a hard season, enduring one of life's valleys? James did, and he was using his pen to breathe hope and life into them.

Those early Christians were living on the run—pushed from their communities by persecution. Their professions of faith had created new pressures, and just like a distance runner who starts at too high a pace, these believers were feeling winded, and not sure they had what it takes to finish.

Following Jesus Christ had made their lives harder. And they were feeling depressed. Not let me say two things I've learned over the years about depression.

Depression sets in when we start to believe lies.

One of those lies that the Enemy whispers is this. He says:

Life will always feel just like this.

This cloud over your head will never leave. This grief, this sadness—it's a terminal sentence.

Your life is ruined. You will never feel happy again. That is not true. Satan says: You're all alone. You're on an island with no ship coming. And he wants you to believe that you're the only one going through this. This is one of the reasons why church membership matters—simply taking your seat in worship, and feeling the Holy Spirit moving through the hearts of the flock—this will fight off depression and destroy the illusion of isolation.

Are you carrying a heavy cross today? Are you feeling a deep grief? Don't think for a second that you will always feel like this. You won't. Jesus said, "This too shall pass." That's one lie. The second lie is this:

No "real" Christian would ever feel this discouraged.

Satan's favorite question seems to be: What is wrong with you? This depression must be the result of some deficiency—find it!. Satan says: just look around: everyone else is soaring while you're barely surviving. You should be ashamed of yourself. And guess what happens? The weight of shame is added to the weight of sorrow and the person is double heavy.

Depression is not necessarily a result of some deficiency. Just read 1 Kings 18 and 19. In chapter 18, Elijah is heroic—standing on a mountain and calling down fire from heaven. God used him mightily, to push back the false prophets of Baal.

You would think Elijah could live off that moment for years. Instead, in the very next chapter, we find our hero hiding in a cave, exhausted, afraid, and praying, “Lord, kill me now. I am of no use to you.”

How does a man go from such heights to such depths in a single day? The answer is simple: he was a human being and part of our maturity process is learning to master our emotions, rather than letting emotions master us.

On your dark days, do not buy the lie: “No real Christian would ever be this discouraged!”

Nonsense. We are just jars of clay, the Apostle Paul said, and in our weakness, He will prove Himself strong. If we will not give up.

James 5:7–11...

“Therefore, brothers and sisters, be patient until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth and is patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, because the Lord’s coming is near.

Brothers and sisters, do not complain about one another, so that you will not be judged. Look, the judge stands at the door!

Brothers and sisters, take the prophets who spoke in the Lord’s name as an example of suffering and patience. See, we count as blessed those who have endured. You have heard of Job’s endurance and have seen the outcome that the Lord brought about—the Lord is compassionate and merciful.”

Here James looks to motivate his sorrowful friends. Let’s look at the first one:

When You’re Feeling Low

1. Look to the future. (vv.7–9)

Therefore, brothers and sisters, be patient until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits...

A person's life is compared to the planting of crops. Every farmer knows that when he plants the seeds in the soil, he has no choice but to wait for visible progress. The soil shows no sprout but this doesn't mean there is no life. No sane farmer plants a seed, comes back two days later, and says, "What a complete waste of time! It didn't work!"

No, the farmer understands how God hardwired seeds. They germinate slowly. It will take its sweet time to pierce the surface, grow a stalk, and produce a vegetable. The farmer will get what he wants if he gets how growth works.

It's just like that with us, James says. You feel stuck in the mud. You feel like your life is at a stand-still? "Yes, I do. I can't see anything good happening right now." That's now how it works. That's not how God works. When we read Scripture, so many of the promises He has made are in the you-must-wait-for-it category.

We look at our lives and we say, "I gave my life to Christ. I've been following Jesus' commands. I've been living the life. For what? I don't see any of the fruit I was expecting."

The answer: you haven't given it enough time. Look at v. 8.

You must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, because the Lord's coming is near.

This seems like a hard sell, doesn't it. Your friend is down in the dumps—they have lost a loved one or watched a dream die—and the best thing you have to offer is: Just remember that Jesus is coming back soon!

Why would James make that jump? Why say to a low person—just look to the Second Coming of Christ!

Well, first of all—what is the Second Coming of Christ. If you're new to the Bible, this may be new information. Here's what Scripture says:

When a person repents of their sins and accepts Christ as Savior, they instantly receive the Holy Spirit, which is a deposit that guarantees their inheritance. In other words, the innate sense of eternity enters into their present. They become part of the kingdom of God—now.

You can enter the kingdom of God NOW by surrendering your life and future to Jesus. But with that, you also have to accept what He has told us about the future. And you have to keep this perspective. You have to keep putting on the mind of Christ.

He has told us that He is coming to Planet Earth. He was not unclear about this. I'll share three

things he mentioned:

The Second Coming

His return is certain.

Listen to the words spoken by the angels immediately after Jesus ascended into heaven:

“Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand looking up into heaven? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come in the same way that you have seen him going into heaven.” Acts 1:11

Notice the certainty in that statement. They angels don't say "we are pretty sure he's coming back." They don't say: "there's a strong possibility of a return." No, the angels say without hesitation: *This same Jesus, will come in the same way that you have seen him going into heaven.*

For us today, that means that we now live in the Church Age. That is, we were all born in-between the two comings. The first coming we call Christmas. It happened in Bethlehem, that God put on human skin. He grew into a man. He took our sins upon His shoulders. His body placed a tomb. He rose again and he promised his return, when the time is ripe, there will be a reward for those he finds waiting.

His return will be visible.

Jesus Himself said:

“Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.” Mark 13:26

If you're a naturalist, I know that blows your mind. You say it's impossible for all the world to see the same thing in their sky. Believe it. God can make anything happen, including speaking a universe into existence by His Word.

From the time Jesus ascended, scoffers and mockers have multiplied, making fun of Christians who still hold onto the belief that Jesus is coming back visibly one day soon. And sadly, we live in a day when the people who are regarded as brilliant are those who question anything beyond the material world.

Christian philosopher Dallas Willard wasn't wrong when he wrote:

We live in a culture that has, for centuries, cultivated the idea that the skeptical person is always smarter than one who believes. You can almost be as stupid as a cabbage as long as you doubt. –Dallas Willard, Hearing God

Willard is not calling anyone stupid—he's just saying that we now live in a world where you will be labeled like that if you believe in something beyond human comprehension.

Jesus said his return will be world-wide visible. You can accept it, or you can reject it.

His return will make all things right.

Paul describes that day this way:

“The Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the archangel's voice, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.” 1 Thessalonians 4:16

Graves will be opened. Relationships resumed. Promises will be fulfilled. Justice will be served. And that's exactly why James, in the next verse, warns the believers in the v.9, and by the way, If I were you, I'd work on being well-behaved. I wouldn't start throwing other Christians under the bus! V. 9:

Brothers and sisters, do not complain about one another, so that you will not be judged. Look, the judge stands at the door!

You've heard the expression, “Hurting people hurt people.” The Christians were turning on each other—like a family on a road trip that needs to stop and eat. Have you noticed: when people have to wait a long time for food, they become downright demonic.

We used to have a sign in our kitchen: we mean not what we say when we are hangry.

Same principle here: when we get tired of waiting for Jesus to return—when we get fed up with watching evil people get away with it, when we see loved ones losing their battle to cancer, when we start to feel like all of the best days of our lives are behind us—what should we do?

Put our eyes back on Jesus Christ, the author and the perfecter of the faith. Be assured, this trial is temporary. In the future, He will finish what He started. But in the meantime, be nice.

Don't complain about one another. Good words help people wait for God.

So, point one, when the going gets tough—remember what the Word of God says about the future. Wait with hope.

Second...

2. Look to the past. (vv. 10–11a)

V. 10... Brothers and sisters, take the prophets who spoke in the Lord's name as an example of suffering and patience. See, we count as blessed those who have endured.

James says: just turn around and see all the saints who suffered and still held onto their faith, till the very end.

If you ask most people who attended seminary—what was your favorite class—many will say church history. It’s amazing what we learn when we look at the world through others’ eyes, those who endured.

Well-known pastor, John Piper, once said:

“Christian biographies have served as much as any other human force in my life to overcome the inertia of mediocrity. Without them I tend to forget what joy there is in relentless labor and aspiration.” John Piper

He’s right about this.

Charles Spurgeon is lauded today as the Prince of Preachers. We hear that name Spurgeon and we picture someone strong. He was a big man with a booming voice. Like most saints of the past, we assume they were all covered with superhero skin. But when we read their biographies, we see how human-sized they were, how much weakness they had to work through. Listen to these insights from Spurgeon...

- At age 22, he was preaching to 10,000 people, when someone shouted “Fire!” And though there was no fire, a stampede took place killing seven people and injuring many others. Years later, Spurgeon said that the horror of the event still affected him. How many of us, have experienced a traumatic event, that still haunts us?
- Second, as a preacher, people were so spellbound by his sermons that he was constantly being requested as a guest speaker. He had a hard time saying no, and he became a workaholic. He would often preach 10X a week, working 18 hours a day—and you can only do that so long before you are burnt out spiritually and physically. He started battling bouts of depression.

Lynley and I both read Spurgeon’s *Encouragement For the Depressed*, a little book that takes an hour to read. Here’s a few lines. See if you relate to his struggle.

He that lives by feeling will be happy today and unhappy tomorrow; and if our salvation depended upon our feelings, we should be lost one day and saved another, for they are as fickle as the weather, and go up and down like a barometer. –Spurgeon, *Encouragement for the Depressed*

Spurgeon came to realize the unpredictable weather patterns of his heart—that some days he would wake up full, and some days dead empty. He gradually learned that God used the low points as preparation for the high points.

Depression comes over me whenever the Lord is preparing a larger blessing for my ministry; the cloud is black before it breaks, and overshadows before it yields its flood of mercy....the wilderness is the way to Canaan. The low valley leads to the towering mountain. Defeat prepares for victory. –Spurgeon, *Encouragement for the Depressed*

Those are words spoken from a spiritual giant—a man who walked through many valleys and stood on many mountains.

Brothers and sisters, James says, look at the preachers who came in the past—those who spoke in the Lord's name—look at their suffering and their patience. They did not give up because they saw no growth. They stuck it out and they were blessed because they endured.

Charles Spurgeon would preach to ten million people in his lifetime, and yet he did have to learn how to live in his jar of clay.

This is exactly what the writer of Hebrews celebrates in the Hall of Faith:

They were stoned, they were sawed in two, they died by the sword, they wandered about in sheepskins, in goatskins, destitute, afflicted, and mistreated. The world was not worthy of them. Hebrews 11:37-38

What a remarkable statement. “The world was not worthy of them.” Why? What made them different? They would not abandon their faith no matter what hard thing happened. In doing so, they revealed that they had already been born into another world.

When you are feeling low, don't just look at your circumstances. Look at the cloud of witnesses who have gone before you. Remember the prophets. Remember the apostles. Remember the faithful saints throughout history.

Now, let's look at the final point James makes, in motivating us to keep our chin up, when life deals us difficulty. He finishes by saying:

3. Look up to the Father. (v. 11b)

Whenever we suffer, as humans, we cannot help but look up but look up to the sky and ask, “Why?”

No person has ever wondered “Why” more than the man we know as Job.

As a kid, I always thought his name was “job” and wondered if this was the book of the Bible where people found advice for employment.

James points us to Job, that we might learn from his life specifically. What did Job have to learn, the hard way? He had to learn endurance. The end of v.11...

You have heard of Job's endurance and have seen the outcome that the Lord brought about. The Lord is compassionate and merciful.

Your father in heaven is compassionate and merciful.

We understand why Job was justified in questioning this, do we not? No one in Scripture suffered more dramatically. In a matter of days, he lost his wealth, his children, and his health. The Lord permitted Satan to strip away nearly every gift except the gift of life itself. Why would God allow such one man to face so many things?

The answer takes us behind the curtain of heaven. Satan claimed that Job's faith was shallow. He argued that Job loved God only because God had blessed him so abundantly. "Take away his blessings," Satan said, "and that man will curse You to Your face."

And so the test began. Would Job continue trusting God when life no longer felt pleasant? If you read the book, you'll see that in the end, Job says:

I had heard reports about you, but now my eyes have seen you. Job 42:5

He does not say to God: "Now I understand everything." No, he does not understand the why—he's never told about Satan's visit and the origins of the test. But he does say, post-suffering: "Now I see You." His suffering had driving him deep in the heart of God, closer than he'd ever been before. And that is exactly why James points us to him.

Because life may not always make sense, but one thing is always clear: Once you become his child, God is forever on your side, and even the suffering will work together for the good.

When life hurts, we are often tempted to question the goodness of God's heart. James says, "That's outside the boundaries. Don't do that." You may not understand His plans. You may not understand His timing. You may not understand His methods. But you can always believe that God has your back and when it's all over, you'll see how it came out good.

When life is feeling low, don't blame God, and don't run from God. Run to him.

Now, with my time remaining, let's see if I can raise some questions that may have popped into your head as I was plowing through the passage.

A Seasoned Christian Asks:

You mentioned the story of Job. What is the main thing we should take away from that depressing book?

This is one of those "let's go a little deeper" questions. The book of Job is often seen as depressing and I get that. When famous preacher Chuck Swindoll preached a series of 22

messages through that book, he announced on week 22 that this would finish the exposition. The congregation rose in a standing ovation. They were ready to be done.

Job is most often read when a person is down in the dumps, when they are trying to make sense of suffering. But the focus of Job is not “what to do when we suffer.” The focus is more theological: “what to think about God's power.”

In chapter 38, God says to his servant: "Where were you when I established the earth?" (Job 38:4) And for four chapters, this rapid-fire litany of question is posed to Job. Where were you when I filled the oceans, situated the mountains, hung the stars? God reminds Job that this is HIS Father's world.

The lesson of Job is not, “Here's why humans suffer.” The lesson is, “Here is the One who can help when the world breaks your heart.” Because it will. It's only a matter of time. Eventually, you will walk wounded, and the remedy will not be clean explanations. The healing only comes by trusting the sovereignty of the Father.

Imagine a little boy who has been told his tonsils must come out. Until that moment, he didn't even know he had these things in the back of his throat. His father sits by his bedside as the nurse comes in with needles. He sees the fear in his son's eyes.

The little boy in his gown, looks so small and fragile, in that oversized bed. The father feels for the boy and even though the boy can't comprehend what a tonsil is and why it needs to be cut out, the Father reassures him that this will be over soon and when it's done, he'll be well.

His faith in his Father creates courage, not clear explanations of procedures.

That is what the book of Job ultimately teaches us—that we can trust the Father even when we don't understand what is happening, even when we don't have answers. Job is a story about a man who suffered greatly, but came away from his losses with a larger vision of God, a more intimate relationship with God, which—according to the Bible—is THE greatest treasure available on Earth.

A Good-Hearted Skeptic Asks:

How can you trust a God you don't fully understand?

Do we really live by the principle that we only trust what we fully understand? Think about how often we trust things we cannot completely explain. We hope on airplanes having no idea how aerodynamics work. We ride roller coasters without understanding the design of harnesses. We let the dentist do a “root canal” having no idea why roots need to be canaled.

Every day, we trust people and systems that are outside our understanding. Why is it different with God? The Bible simply expects you to believe in the Trinity, without explaining how it all works—that there is just one God, but expressed in three distinct persons. The most brilliant Bible scholars on the planet disagree on the end times, the tribulation, and the rapture. Enormous books have been written exploring the question: how can God be fully sovereign and we still have free will?

I'm going to go ahead and tell you, on this side of eternity, none of those things are going to be settled. Because we don't know for sure. There are mysteries that belong to the Lord. But we don't have to know it all, to believe in God.

The Apostle Paul said:

For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, as I am fully known. 1 Corinthians 13:12

Paul was absolutely brilliant. I mean—a brain the size of a beach ball! He wrote Romans. He was a theological genius, and yet he admits that even he could only see a tiny portion of what God sees. He was comfortable admitting that there were things he could not comprehend. Why is that so hard for us?

God has provided enough evidence to believe—for those who want to believe. Maybe the bigger question is not: do you believe? Maybe the bigger question is: do you want to believe? Living by faith requires stepping beyond your understanding.

But you already do that. You already live most of your life by faith. You just don't call it faith when you're boarding Delta.

A Student Asks:

I've never known my dad. He left when I was young. How am I supposed to trust God as my Father when my only experience with a father is abandonment?

That is a heartbreaking question.

If this describes your situation, you're not alone. Today, nearly one out of every four children in America lives without a father in the home. That's roughly 18 million children.

How can you trust a heavenly Father when your earthly father was lousy? The very person who was supposed to give you a glimpse of God ended up distorting the image.

Psalms 68:5 says that God is “a father to the fatherless.” Think about that. God is the perfect Father. In a non-broken world, your earthly father would be a reflection of the Heavenly Father. That's the way it was supposed to be..

Of all the titles God could have chosen, He specifically identifies Himself as the Father, so of course it is tragic for a young person to live without a functioning dad.

So what does God say: I will be the Father to the fatherless. When your earthly father fails, I will be there. When our earthly father leaves, I will be there. If your earthly father pushes you down, I'll be there to pick you up. He knows some never show up. God steps into the gap and says, "I will be the Father you never had."

Not only that, as the old saying goes, "When God closes a door, He opens a window." You may have no relationship with your "real dad" but the Lord often provides a person in the body of Christ who is willing to step in and fill that void. A coach. A grandfather. A Life Group teacher. A mentor. That person can never replace your father, but they can provide a glimpse of what a godly dad-like person looks like.

And here's the beautiful part of redemption.

In Exodus, God says that the sins of the father can ripple through several generations, but God's great love extends to a thousand generations. In other words, God's presence in your life is far more potent than a father's.

The wound is often the place where our greatest ministries show up. Some of the best fathers on the planet are those who didn't have one growing up. Those men learned to love the Father in heaven and thus, they could build a beautiful family of their own. Your father's mistakes do not have to become your destiny. They can actually be your drive.