

Enduring Love

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- [0 : 0 0] Okay, well, we will go now to James's letter, chapter five. We're looking at that last part of the letter, which Chris read to us a few minutes ago.
- So Friday evening this week, I had a very nice dinner invitation. Somebody was hosting me at a dinner at the Balmoral.
- And they'd booked a nice suite for us to have our dinner together on the second floor with a huge window looking at the castle and down along Princess Street with all the lights that are there for Christmas and the Christmas market and so on.
- And it was great. Well, immediately at home because I'm a five-star kind of guy, although I live on a two-star budget.
- And we had dinner at the Balmoral and then I had a friend in town who wanted to go and see a 1980s jazz funk band called Incognito.
- [1 : 1 3] So we went to see this band. That finished about half past eleven. We came back out into Princess Street and as we're crossing Princess Street, there was a homeless guy standing in the middle of the road, ranting and raving, really angry, shouting at everyone.
- And it was such an evening of contrasts, sort of just reminding me of the differences that people face. That we live in a world where there are so many differences between people and their life situations.
- Now, James is a letter about the ordinary hardships of life. Just the stuff that goes wrong for all of us. Illness, relationship difficulties, money worries.
- And we all face those kind of issues in life together. But James understands that what makes those hardships even more difficult to put up with are the differences.
- So it's not just that we have money worries, but part of the stress is that we all have different amounts of money. Some people have much more, some people have much less. And living with those differences is hard.
- [2 : 3 2] Or some people have much better health, or some people are happily married and some people aren't. And so we see the differences that there are between ourselves and others. And that stirs up envy and discontentment and bitterness and resentment, envy and strife.
- The differences are what make so many things really hard to live with. And James is trying to teach us how do we live wisely, so it's wisdom literature.
- You know that if you've been here, you've heard that said. How do we live wisely in a world where there are so many difficulties and hardships and differences?
- And I think that I want to say to you tonight that to live wisely in this world, then we need to turn to God in love.
- And to turn to God in love, we need to know His love. So in other words, put it this way, God's unending love for us is the source of our enduring love for Him.
- [3 : 4 4] So God's unending love for us is the source of our enduring love for Him. Because this is a letter about enduring love, love that lasts through the hard times and the bad times and the sad times and the difficulties and the pain.

So I'm going to look at how we can love God in every situation of love. We're going to think about how community is really important in helping us to turn to God in love.

And then we're going to think about how we nurture the gospel at the heart of our community so that we can love God as we should. So how do we love God in every situation of life?

As we've noted, life has so many hardships. But what we should remember is this, that life is also layered with goodness.

So just look at verse 13, if you've got a Bible in front of you, listen to how James speaks to the Christian community. He says, is any one of you suffering hardships?

[4 : 48] Okay, he's thinking hardships, hard times, difficulties. But then he says, is anyone cheerful? So he's thinking good times, happiness, blessings.

Now being Scottish, we're very good at the hardship stuff and we can sort of find it really easy to be negative about life. It's like a TripAdvisor review where the guy's had the most delicious steak and it melted in his mouth and the dessert was incredible, but all he writes is about the soggy fries.

And lots of us, we're really just negative about life and we see the problems and we forget every day to remind ourselves that the world we live in is shot through with the goodness and the beauty and the kindness of God and that it's all around us all the time.

It's vital to remember every day that there are countless examples of God's common grace, in music, in art, in nature, in the kindness of a stranger, in the generosity and thoughtfulness of other people.

A supermoon rising in the sky. A tune that we remember from our childhood that cheers us up or a joke that someone tells us to make us laugh, all part of God's lovely, kind, common grace that work in our world all the time.

[6 : 13] And what James wants to say to us is that, you know, life's like that, it's mixed. It's not one thing or the other, there's good and there's bad.

We've got to recognise both things, the good and the bad, and both things should cause us to turn to God. So sometimes you get people who turn to God when things are tough.

So sometimes I've experienced kids, perhaps, not pointing the finger at anybody in particular, but they ignore their parents until they're hungry.

So they're in the room all day and then suddenly it's like, where's my dinner? You see, I need something from you all of a sudden, so I'm interested in you. Some Christians are like that, you know, when I'm hungry, when I need something from God, I turn to them when things are rough.

Some of us, you know, we love to talk to God and thank Him when things are good and then when things are difficult, we get sulky and pout and grumble and turn away from God. But James is like, well, listen, in every situation of life, turn to God.

[7 : 15] Are you suffering? Then pray. Are things good? Then praise. So wherever you are in life, you're always facing in the same direction. You're always facing to God and you're always speaking to God about what's going on in your world.

You're speaking to Him about the good things and saying, I want to thank you God for the beauty of the world I live in, for the community of faith that I'm part of, for the great news of the Gospel and on and on and so many things every day to just be thankful for and say, God, I praise you, I love you.

You are so good and you have lavished your kindness over my life. And then when we are facing hard times, we pray, we bring those things to God and ask Him.

So this is wisdom. If James is talking about wisdom and what it is to live life with wisdom, then wisdom is to allow the thought of God to dominate every situation of life.

The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. When we're living the wise life, we're seeing that God's the one who's over everything and surrounding everything.

[8 : 24] That we're encircled by God at every point of our existence. And so the wise way to live is to always be facing towards Him, always to turn to Him.

Often when things are hard, we respond foolishly. We turn in on ourselves to nurse our anger or bitterness or selfishness.

Or sometimes when things are good, we respond foolishly. We turn inside to pride or to pleasure, to hedonism, to indifference towards people who are needy or broken.

But the wise person, James says, always turns to God. That's the day-to-day posture of our life.

So we're being asked to love God in every situation of life, worship God in every situation of life, no matter what's going on around us.

[9 : 30] Because James wants us to endure in our relationship with God at every point, to keep going, to keep focused on God, to keep facing God, and to do so with a sense of purpose and hope that God is good.

My life is in His hands and He has so much good in store for me. Yes, things are difficult, but the great theme of James' letter is this, that God is purposely working in my life for my joy and happiness.

And so we don't just move forward with a sense of gritted teeth, or with gritted teeth, but we move forward with a sense of hope and joy. That even when things are hard, something good is happening, because I'm in the care of a loving God who holds everything in His hands.

So I don't know what your circumstances are like personally right now, but I do want to say to you whatever your circumstances, be taking them to God. The difficult things are good things.

I want to kind of move on from there and just talk about how the love of a community helps us to connect to the love of God in every situation of life. Because it's one thing to say, you know, we should be Godward facing in all the circumstances of life, but it's actually not always easy for us to do that.

[10 : 57] And so what does God do? Well, God kindly recognizes our human frailties and how hard we find it to face Him and to turn our lives towards Him.

And so He surrounds us with other people who are there to help us along the way and to encourage us and to care for us. So He says to you, in all your situations, you should pray.

And then in verse 14, He focuses in on the sick person in particular. He says, what about you? Is anyone sick? Well, he's got two things he's got to say to sick people. First of all, call the elders.

Give them a buzz or email and get in touch and ask them to pray over you. And then in verse 16, he's again talking about how we relate to each other in the church.

He's talking about confess your sins to each other, but also pray for one another that you may be healed. He's talking about the sick person here. In that situation, we need community. And as we'll see in a minute, when we're struggling with sin in our life, in that situation, we also need community.

[12 : 04] So those are two things, two struggles that James picks out here. The struggle with illness and the struggle with sin. And he says, listen, to face God and deal well and wisely and live wisely in these difficulties, we need the community of God's people.

A lot of us aren't that keen on community. And we may choose not to form close relationships with people who are Christians.

And we may choose to keep our distance. But when we do so, we're actually really impoverishing ourselves. And so in this church, there are so many good ways of connecting into community, especially through your city groups of your younger, through identity and so on.

And even though you might find those quite difficult sometimes, those kind of relational contexts, I really encourage you to work at them hard. You know, endure in that situation too, because there will be times when Christian community is an absolute amazing blessing to you.

And you're really going to need it. And if it's not there for you, you're going to suffer without it. So if you're sick, what does he say? He says, well, call the elders. So if you're an elder in St. Columbus, then God sent to you that you have a particular pastoral responsibility.

[13 : 27] So sometimes elders have lots of meetings, and it's very easy for people in Christian leadership to think in terms of tasks and meetings and stuff they've got to do.

But James actually lays a really weighty pastoral responsibility in the elders of the church right here. And says that you should know your congregation so well that if they want you to come and pray over them, then you can do so with pastoral insight and wisdom and understanding of what they're going through, and the ability to pray wisely with faith for them in their time of need.

And that then speaks of real pastoral connections between elders and the rest of the congregation. So that means elders have to think really carefully about how they operate in the life of a church.

But it's a great thing for you, if you are part of this congregation, to know that there are people here who are really willing to come and meet with you, pray with you, talk with you and support you when you're finding life particularly difficult.

And if you're in that kind of situation, you shouldn't hesitate to ask for help. Often we struggle on our own when there are people who are very ready to help us.

[14 : 58] So he speaks about these elders and we invite them to come and pray. So it's not that the elders kind of jump in through your front door and kicking it down and saying, I'm here. It's much more like if you really feel you're in a difficult situation, then get in touch with the elders and invite them along.

And they're going to pray anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick and the Lord will raise him up. So these are really interesting verses. What is James talking about?

Well, what does it mean to anoint with oil, first of all? Well, some people think the oil is medicinal, that it was some kind of like first century way of making feel better by pouring some sort of lovely oil on them, sort of a bit of aromatherapy maybe going on there.

Some people have sort of that kind of medicinal view of it. Some people have a slightly more magical view of it. This is some kind of sacramental oil, and these priestly men come along, and because they pray and anoint you with oil, that there's a certain power conferred on God in that action that means that this sacrament will bring healing to you.

I don't think that medicine or magic are involved in this at all. It's probably much more likely that the background to this is from the Old Testament, where we do read, from the earlier part of the Bible, people were often anointed with oil.

[16 : 27] And the anointing of oil was to set somebody apart in life for a special purpose. So it's a kind of idea of consecrating or devoting something to God.

So if somebody was anointed with oil, it was saying that they are there to serve God and live for his glory in a particular way. Someone like King David would be anointed with oil, setting him aside to serve God as king, or Aaron or one of the prophets set aside to serve God as priest or prophet.

So the oil perhaps speaks then of how God will use suffering in the life of a person in order to help them serve him more faithfully and more fruitfully.

God can use illness, suffering, to change our lives in such a way that our lives become more fragrant, more fruitful in his service.

And that certainly really does tie in with the theme of James's letter, if we have the wisdom to endure for God through difficult times, then our lives will bear a rich harvest.

[17 : 49] So we can just go down earlier into chapter 5, be patient. So this is this idea of enduring, being patient, brothers, to 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.

You also be patient, establish your heart for the coming of the Lord as at hand. Patience brings fruit. You wait, you get the harvest. You persevere, you endure, then God will bring about good from your perseverance and endurance.

So what the elders are praying for is this, that this person's suffering will bear a harvest of righteousness in their life.

Their illness and suffering will produce humility in them, prayerfulness, a sweetness of character, a gentleness of temperament, a nearness to God.

And that prayer, of course, means that they're really seeking that this person will turn to God in their illness, rather than away from God, as we're often tempted to do when things are hard.

[19 : 13] If we help people to face God and meet with God in the hard times, then it will produce a harvest in their life.

So I was at a meeting on Friday afternoon, which I thought was at the Balmoral, and I had a friend from the States coming to speak at this meeting, so I said, meet me in the foyer of the Balmoral at 12.30, so I was late, and I rushed out at the Balmoral about 20 to 12 when they asked me, right, where's this meeting? Which room is it in?

I thought, which room is it in? And then I realized it was in the hub. So we were in the wrong building altogether. We jumped in a taxi, got up there, but she was speaking about her faith in work and the relationship between her faith in work.

But she doesn't know who her dad is. She was taken away from her mother when she was a few months old. Her mother had mental health problems. She was raised by her grandmother, who died when she was in her early teens.

So she's got no siblings. She's been on her own in this world most of her life. And she's been through a lot of very difficult times, and there was a Q&A; with her afterwards. And she's had a really fascinating life. She works for the mayor of New York.

[20 : 25] She's served God in lots of really amazing and wonderful and remarkable ways. But somebody asked her, you know, is there anything you regret or would change? And she just said, I wish I had parents.

And then she went on to say, but if I had parents, I wouldn't be who I was today. And God couldn't have used me the way He's used me today. And so she was saying, my suffering has brought a harvest of righteousness.

And that's at the heart of the prayer of faith, that God will use your suffering so that your life will be more fully and completely committed to Him.

And you'll be able to serve Him more beautifully in this world. How does the prayer of faith make the sick person well? Well, this is not telling you that if you have enough faith, you can make every sick person well again.

There is nobody who had faith like Jesus Christ. But when Jesus asked to be spared the cup of suffering of crucifixion in the Garden of Gethsemane, God did not remove the cup of suffering from Him. Jesus had to face the cross.

[21 : 40] So it's not as if if you can pray hard enough, you get everything you want. If that was true, that would put an amazingly hard burden on us.

If we didn't get what we want, we would blame ourselves. Or we would suddenly feel responsible to pray for every person and every problem. If we could fix everything with our prayers, then suddenly we're in the really difficult position of having to decide what's the right thing to do here.

We're finding ourselves in God's role. We decide what happens just by praying for it. So that's not what the prayer of faith means.

The prayer of faith, I think, is knowing that I will be healed in God's time and in God's way. Sometimes only in the new creation will we be truly free from illness and from sickness.

But it's this confidence that now or in the resurrection, I will be healed. Spiritually, physically, I will be healed. Maybe in ways I can't see or understand right now through my sufferings even, God will heal and change me.

[22 : 46] If you look carefully at what is said here, it says the Lord, the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick and will raise him up.

So the language is salvation and resurrection as opposed to healing. That resurrection may be the resurrection in the new creation.

The salvation may be spiritual rather than physical. So this is not a guaranteed blank check. We can heal every day we want to heal. We understand that.

But it does mean that we need to care for each other in sickness, encourage each other in sickness, help each other to turn towards God in sickness. And the same goes in situations of sin.

So he talks about sin here very clearly. And he says that if he's committed sins in verse 15, he'll be forgiven, the person that we're praying for.

[23 : 46] So therefore confess your sins to one another, pray for one another that you may be healed. So illness and sin are linked in at least two ways. And that's what's happening here. There's a connection between illness and sin.

Now sometimes it's just the fact that we're sick because we've made sinful choices, lifestyle choices that have harmed us. That's one simple way of understanding the connection between illness and sin.

But I think the other way to be clear about this and to understand this, and it's probably more relevant for a lot of us here, is that often our illness occasions sin, or we sin more in particular ways when we're sick.

Illness is the occasion of sin we grumble. We grumble against God, against others. We're bitter, we're angry.

Our illness is the occasion for our sin. Now I've been there, I've been out often in my adult life with long-term illnesses. And sometimes felt really disillusioned with God, with people joyless.

[25 : 04] Why has God done this to me? Why is God so cruel to everyone? You know, the occasion of my sin grumbling. And as you know from James, God takes grumbling very seriously indeed.

It may be a national pastime for Scottish people to grumble, but it doesn't mean it's okay. And yet often our illness brings us to sin.

And God is offended by our grumbling, our bitterness, our anger, and our self-pity. Because it means that we're not trusting God the way Job trusted God.

So again in James chapter 5, we're given the example of God, of Job and of others. And we're told that they're there as an example too, as of trusting God.

So verse 11, you have heard of the steadfastness of Job, so a man who stands out for all is suffering, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

[26 : 05] So why don't we grumble when things aren't going well? Why don't we develop a critical spirit? Why don't we moan and groan? Why don't we feel sorry for ourselves? Because like Job, we believe that we have seen the purpose of the Lord, and that the purpose of the Lord is for our good, and that the Lord is compassionate and merciful, and that we trust His goodness, His love, and His character.

So when you're struggling in life, and you're tempted to bitterness and self-pity, and moaning and groaning and complaining about everything, you're offending God who is good and compassionate and loving, and whose purposes for you are love and goodness.

So we have a community, and this community, we're here to remind ourselves of these truths. God is good. God will work through our suffering and our pain to bring a harvest of righteousness and blessing.

To allow this to happen, just a couple of minutes, I want to say that that means we need to nurture the gospel at the heart of our community. So just look at the end here. You know, people fall into sin, we have to confess our sins to each other, so if you've sinned against someone, this is what it's talking about, you need to go in and confess your sins to them and repent before them and look for forgiveness from them, because often bitterness divides people.

We criticize each other, we say things, and that breaks down community, and we need healthy community to care for each other in the gospel. So when it says confess your sins to one another, that's what that's talking about.

[27 : 52] So my brothers, if any one of you wanders from the truth and someone brings them back, let them know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

So what's the danger here? Well, the danger here is that if we wander from the truth, then we're not going to be the kind of community that can sustain each other in the love of God.

We're not the kind of community that will encourage each other to keep facing God in love and hope and trust. What truth has been spoken about? People used to read this and just assume that if somebody stops coming to church, you have to go and bring them back to church, but it actually doesn't mention the word church, does it?

It talks about truth. So what's the truth? Well, the truth is the teaching of the gospel, the Christian faith. And the Christian faith needs to be nurtured among us, needs to be held to among us.

We need to keep reminding each other of the great goodness of the gospel. So nurture the gospel at the heart of the community.

[29 : 05] Keep reminding one another of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. That's how the Christians in the New Testament looked after each other.

They didn't just say cheer up or let's go for a pint or you want a game of, I don't know, call of duty or whatever it is you like to play, you know? That's not how they cheered each other up in the New Testament.

They told each other about Jesus who died in the cross for one another. So you think about the letter to the Hebrews. And they were Christians who were really struggling in life and tempted to give up in their faith.

What are they told? They're told, look to Jesus who is the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross despising its shame and was seated at the right hand of God.

Okay? So here's people struggling and they don't know what way to go. This is the very essence of James as well. They don't know what way to go. Will we walk away from God or will we have the wisdom to turn back to God in love?

[30 : 16] This is the dilemma of the Hebrews. So what does he say to them? He says, remember Jesus. If you're thinking of turning away, remember Jesus.

What do you want to remember about Jesus? Remember Jesus who for the joy set before him endured the cross. What's God asking you to do? He's asking you to endure.

What's he asking you to do? He's asking you to endure sufferings, hardships, pain. What did Jesus endure? He endured the cross for the joy set before him.

So what's James about? It's about enduring patiently to get the harvest. What did Jesus do at the cross? He endured patiently to get the harvest. What's the harvest for Jesus?

You're the harvest. Jesus endured the cross for the joy of bringing you home to his Father in heaven.

[31 : 23] Often we're impatient in life. What's impatient about? Well, it's saying that my needs come first and everything else comes second. That's what impatience about my needs first, everything else second.

We're patient. We're saying my needs last, everything else first. And that's the way Jesus was.

My needs last, everything else first. He's willing to defer his gratification so that the needs of others will be met.

He's patient because you're the joy set before him. And we're patient because we're the joy set before him.

Well, we're patient because we're the joy set before him.

[32 : 27] to get Him. Isn't that a great simple way of putting that? Jesus endured to get you so that you could endure to get Him. Jesus prayed to get you so that you could pray to get Him.

Jesus prayed and waited so that He would have you as His harvest and so that you could pray and have Him as your harvest. That's the gospel. That's the truth. That if we wander away from that truth, we can't endure the hardships. We've nowhere to go. And so we keep bringing each other back to the gospel, to Jesus, to the cross and to His sufferings.

And when we see Christ in the cross, it turns us back to Jesus. And that's the wise life. And that's the end of James. Okay, I'm going to pray. Lord God, we do ask that you would help us this evening to just hear your word to us if we're feeling like giving up and stuff that we will endure, that we will not grow faint, that we will not turn away, but that we will turn this evening in love to Jesus Christ. May this really be a loving, nurturing community that has the gospel in its heart. And may we point each other to Jesus continually as our hope, our life and our joy. Give us patience to endure, Lord, that we may have Christ as our harvest. Amen.