

28. Christian Perseverance

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.

(James 5:10-11)

Christian Perseverance

In the previous chapter, we learned about being patient in suffering and not grumbling. After having written about that, I began thinking that is easy to just say, “Be patient!” It is okay to speak about patience and related virtues when all is going well, but what if things do not go as we want? What about the times when adversity hits us right between the eyeballs? It is easy for other people to tell us to be patient, to bear up, and to accept what has happened or is happening, but where will we get this patience? Who really has patience?

Patience goes against our nature. This can be especially difficult if we have an immediate, hands-on approach to life. I myself am not a patient person in every way. My philosophy generally is to get on with things. If there is a problem, identify it, deal with it, and get it resolved immediately. Patience is fine for people who think they have lots of time, but I have no time to waste.

“Be patient, then, brothers,” James writes in 5:7. It seems as if he realizes that he is almost asking too much, for in the verses immediately following, he gives us a concrete example. He does so because we must understand that patience is not simply a nice virtue to have, but it is a command of God. “Be patient” in this context is not advice given to children who do not know how to wait, but it is a command to adults who seek the maturity of faith.

Patience, or Christian perseverance, is very important with respect to the maturity of faith. We confess in the *Canons of Dort* (Chapter V) that there is something called *the perseverance of the saints*. We find this also in James' letter. Christian perseverance is an essential ingredient in the maturity of faith.

We will look at the example of perseverance, the blessing received through perseverance, and the basis of perseverance.

The Example of the Prophets

James again starts a portion of his letter with the word “brothers”. This word is often employed as a form of appeal. James knows that patience is not easy. When we are unjustly treated, we tend to immediately react in anger. Faced with growing persecution from Romans, Greeks, and even Jews, the Christians in James’ time could have said, “Let’s give it up, and we won’t have to put up with this.” Being Christian is not supposed to be difficult. It is easy for James to say, “Be patient,” but it is impossible to be so in reality.

James therefore presents his readers with an example. We sometimes hear it said that every example has its limitations. That may be true, but this example is one that really does give insight into the question at hand. James writes, “Take [as an example of patience] the prophets...” These men were called and appointed by the LORD himself, showed great courage and dedication, and performed miracles and wonders of faith.

James sums all of this up when he writes, “the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.” These prophets were not self-appointed men who invented a mission, but they were called by God to speak in his Name, and this was evident in the authority of their teaching and the power of their miracles. But how were they treated?

Our Lord Jesus himself spoke about the way the prophets were treated. In Matthew 5:11-12, we read Jesus’ words from the “Sermon on the Mount”: “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” James has not forgotten these words of the Lord Jesus.

Our Lord used the example of the prophets more often. Let us look at Matthew 23:29-30, where Jesus says, “Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’” The Jews said that they would not do what their fathers did, yet they did even worse and killed the chief Prophet and Teacher, the One of

whom all the prophets spoke. And then follows the lament of our Lord in verse 37: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets...”

Jerusalem was to be the city of peace, but it became a city of blood, the blood of the prophets and the righteous. And how did the prophets respond to this persecution? Their reactions were varied, according to their background and gifts, but they all showed patience in the face of suffering.

Patience in the Face of Suffering

Indeed, that which characterizes the prophets is their refusal to let persecution and opposition stop them from saying and doing what they had to. They showed patience, and they bore whatever the LORD allowed their enemies to do to them. I can give various examples of what the prophets had to endure. Actually, the Lord Jesus says that the persecution already began with the killing of Abel by Cain (Matt 23:35). Ever since that murder, the righteous and the prophets have been persecuted and tormented in all imaginable ways.

In Hebrews 11, we read about the treatment of the saints on earth: torn by wild beasts, burned by flames, beheaded by the sword, flogged, imprisoned, and stoned. We read how they went about destitute, persecuted, and mistreated, spit out by the world. They wandered about in deserts and mountains, in caves and holes in the ground. These men are examples to us, writes James. In Hebrews, they are called “witnesses” whose lives were steeped in suffering and cruelly ended in torment. Who can measure the suffering of the saints during the ages, except the Lord?

Patience in the face of suffering is something that the Lord Jesus asks of us all. We must put our shoulders under the load, lift it up, and bear it. When things go well, we can easily have a cheerful disposition, but when we are called to suffer, we must show forth patience, faith, hope, and love. In this, the example of the prophets and the chief Prophet is to us a source of hope and strength. If we should suffer, we are not the first, nor will we be the last.

Some say that the suffering of certain people cannot be an example to others because the suffering of each person is unique. It is true that every person must go his own way and that God asks from one person what he may not ask from another. But James writes that the prophets’ patience is an example, for they have the same faith and hope that we do. The word used literally means

long-suffering, the ability to endure suffering for a long time without seeing any earthly change for the better.

Why Suffering is Required

If the prophets suffered so, do we think that we will be exempt? The question is never, “Will I suffer in some way or another?” Rather, we must ask ourselves, “How will I conduct myself when called to endure suffering, especially for the Lord?” Here we come again to one of the themes of James’ letter: why suffering is required in our lives.

Why is suffering required? Look back at James 1:3: “the testing of your faith develops perseverance.” Remember that passage? We are not tested in order to see whether our faith is real or not. Sometimes, something is tested, that is, put under pressure, in order to make it stronger. God does not need to see how much we can handle, for he knows how weak we are and how prone we are to stumble, but he tests us in order to make us strong and humble at the same time. We are made strong in Christ and humble in ourselves. Then we experience more and more the blessing of endurance.

Suffering is not pleasant, but the result, perseverance, is a source of great blessing. James writes in 5:11, “As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered,” that is, stood firm under suffering. We consider them *blessed*. We do not say to someone who has suffered much, “Oh you poor soul, how sad it is, how bad it is! Come, let us pamper you so that you may feel better again.”

Sometimes we say to a child, “Come, let mommy or daddy kiss away the pain.” This is a parental trick that is widely used and works very well to stop a child’s crying. It is not the kiss that takes away the pain, however, but the attention, the sympathy, and the knowledge that somebody really loves that child. God does not kiss away our pain with a little trick, but he gives us the blessing of endurance. He teaches us the power of faith, the strength of hope, and the tenacity of love. He says to us, “I don’t give up on you, so don’t you dare give up on me!”

This is what perseverance is: we do not give up on God and his promises. No matter what has happened, how much we have been through, or how we have suffered, we do not give up on God. That is the perseverance of the saints.

That is why it is truly a blessing when we are tested, put under pressure, and the result is a strengthening of our faith.

The Example of Job

Those who have persevered are blessed. That is something we *know*. “As you know,” writes James. Christians know how to look farther than what lies immediately before them. We can look beyond our weaknesses, our sicknesses, and the grave. James is not saying anything new, in fact, he is repeating himself.

As we know from the Bible, and also from the communion of saints, we consider blessed those who have persevered. To be blessed means to be declared fortunate and happy. Look at Psalm 119 of the *Book of Praise*: “How good it is that I have suffered pain, for thus in all your statutes you did school me.” There is training in suffering. In Psalm 119, we can find an intense longing: “Teach me, O LORD, give me understanding, direct me, turn my heart and my eyes to you, and fulfill your promise!”

I read in a commentary on James that we would be insufferable if we did not undergo some suffering. In other words, suffering is therapeutic for the soul. I understand what the author of the commentary means to say. By causing us to suffer, the Lord teaches us perseverance and also humility. This is often true, but not always. There are those who suffer much but become rebellious, angry, bitter, callous, and even cruel. In itself, suffering does not make us humble or lead to perseverance, and I will come back to this in a moment.

Notice how James brings in the example of Job at this point. “You have heard of Job’s perseverance” (5:11). None of the people in the churches had ever seen Job, as we also have never seen him, but we have certainly heard of his perseverance. Job hung in there, so to speak, and he remained faithful to the LORD.

We might think, “Wait a minute!” The prophets also had their weak moments. Hunted by Jezebel and fearing he was the only prophet still alive, Elijah prayed for death (I Kgs 19:1-5). Job was not so exemplary either, for he cursed the day of his birth (Job 3:1). It is true that these people were not perfect. Elijah, Job, and others all had their moments of weakness and struggle. We have to understand this. The perseverance of the saints does not mean the perfection of the saints on this earth. Maturity of faith is not the same as the purity or perfection of faith.

This element is sometimes overlooked, but we must always keep in mind that perseverance is not yet perfection. The prophets are not examples to us

because they were so faithful or so strong. Perseverance is not something we can attain ourselves, rather, it is a blessing we receive, writes James. “We consider blessed those who have persevered.” When we look at their situations, we do not praise the people themselves, but we see in their lives the great blessing of God that he caused them to stand firm in the faith until the end.

And when all is said and done, when we look at the perseverance of Job, we see not what Job achieved, but what the Lord finally brought about. The LORD God restored Job to health, gave back his prosperity, gave him a new family, and bestowed on him a long and prosperous life, one that was even greater than before.

The Basis of Perseverance

Did Job deserve all his suffering? Job insisted that he was righteous and there was no reason for this censure. He did not even know that the battle was particularly between the LORD and the devil. His friends berated him for being self-righteous, but Job clung to his innocence. Job was righteous, but only by faith. He was not righteous in himself, nor did he deserve to be blessed again in such abundant measure.

What then is the basis of perseverance? How can it be that we continue in faith to the end, and then inherit even greater riches than we ever had before? The answer is given by James: “The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.” Even Job had to learn that he had everything only by grace, only because the LORD is full of compassion and mercy.

Why is it that some, like Job, persevere? Why is it that others do not? Through knowledge of Scripture, we have learned to explain it in this way: many fall away because of their sinfulness, and some persevere because of God’s grace. When James notes the great blessing of perseverance, he also uncovers the only basis of it: God’s great compassion and boundless mercy. James writes, “The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.” Even after maintaining his righteousness, Job himself said, “I am unworthy — how can I reply to [God]?” (Job 40:4). He also said, “Surely I spoke of things I did not understand... Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:3, 6).

In teaching us perseverance, also through suffering, the Lord leads us time and again to the only basis on which to stand: his compassion and mercy. This is what we have going for us, and it leads us to an inheritance that is greater than anything we can ever have in this life.

We also read the following in James 5:11: “what the Lord finally brought about.” Great blessings again came to the fore in Job’s earthly life. He became

twice as prosperous as before. But still he had to learn to look beyond this life to a greater inheritance. In Job 42:16-17, we read, “After [Job’s full restoration], Job lived a hundred and forty years; he saw his children and their children to the fourth generation. And so he died, old and full of years.”

The man who had cursed the day of his birth also saw the day of his death. What was left? An eternal inheritance with all the saints in the glory of God. Why did he receive all his blessings on earth, and then also eternal inheritance? Because the Lord is full of compassion and mercy. That is the Gospel.

We know that sin had to be punished. God is righteous. Rather than let sin go unpunished, he has punished it in his only begotten Son. And then his mercy is boundless to all who love him. His grace in Christ descends upon all his children. James also wrote in 1:12, “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.” The crown of life is what we really want, for ourselves but also for the Lord. We want to serve and praise him eternally in glory. We want to receive the crown by grace bestowed on us.