OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

"Lord, Give Me Patience!"

David Anguish

For a few years, I taught in a junior high school where our seventh graders had lockers and changed classes for the first time. Many of them had backpacks and it took time for some to learn that, with lockers available, they did not need to carry all their books to every class. For those who had not yet experienced their growth spurt, the weight of a full backpack proportionate to their size was significant. I watched them navigate the halls with a stooped posture that made me fearful they would be knocked off-balance at any moment. That fear was immediately followed by the mental image of a student falling backward onto his backpack and, like a turtle, being unable to get up on his own.

Ever since, whenever I see the word "endurance" in the New Testament, the image that comes to mind is a stooped seventh grader with a backpack trying to navigate a crowded school hallway. Imagine that he is required to do so for several hours on end, and "patience," James's other featured word in 5.7–11, enters the image. Since patient endurance, or enduring with patience, is the text's theme, we'll begin by defining those words.

Related, Not the Same

Forms of the words the ESV translates "patient" and "steadfast" appear six times in this text. To begin with "be patient/patience" (μακροθυμέω, μακροθυμία; *makrothymeō, makrothymia*; four

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times, vv. 7–8, 10), we note first that the Hebrew background includes the idea of one who is "long of nose" (Kohlenberger and Mounce 2012, ¶ 1469). Gerard Groningen elaborates:

> ʾap. *Nostril, face, anger.* The term *ʾap* in Hebrew refers first of all to part of the body, specifically the nose, nostril, (snout of pigs, Prov 11:22) and also face (II Sam 25:23) or countenance…
>
> By the act of breathing, emotions can be expressed. Perhaps it was observed that the nose dilates in anger. God is said to be "*ʾerek ʿappayim*" (lit. "long of anger," i.e. long before getting angry) in such passages as Ex 34:6; Num 14:18; Ps 86:15; Neh 9:17. The thought is that God takes a long, deep breath as he holds his anger in abeyance. A ruler is said to be persuaded by a display of forbearance, patience, i.e. "the long of breath" (Prov 25:15) (Groningen 1980, 58).

Looking closer at Proverbs 25.15, we discover that the ESV, NIV, and others use "patience" to translate two words: אַף, (*ʾap*; "nose") and אָרֵךְ (*ʾārak*; "length"): "With *patience* [בְּאֹרֶךְ אַפַּיִם, *berek appayim*] a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tone will break a bone." W. H. Hollander also calls attention to this verse in his discussion of the use of *makrothymia* in the LXX, noting that "the Hebrew expression that stands behind it in most instances is *ʾerek ʾappayim*, 'the delay of [the outbreak of] wrath'" (Hollander 1991, 380). Douglas Moo adds that the word "denot[es] the long-suffering attitude we are to adopt toward other people (1 Cor. 13:4; Eph. 4:2; 1 Thess. 5:14)" (Moo 2000, 222).

The word for "be steadfast/steadfastness" (ὑπομένω, ὑπομονη; *hypomenō hypomonē*; twice in v. 11) means "to continue to bear up under" (Louw and Nida 1989, 308). Also translated "endure" (NIV, et. al.), it "refers to steadfastness and perseverance 'under' certain circumstances, and also to remaining expectant in the face of passing time" (Radl 1993, 405). Moo adds that it depicts "the strong, determined fortitude with which we need to face difficult circumstances (Rom. 8:25; 2 Cor. 1:6; 2 Thess. 1:4)." He also suggests that we can simplify the distinction between the words by saying that "we are *patient* with people and *endure* difficulties," but qualifies that summation by noting that "this distinction does not appear to apply very neatly to James's use of these two word-groups in this paragraph" [Jas 5.7–11] (Moo 2000, 222). Closer examination of the text confirms his observation.

A Case of Failed Patience

In what at first seems to be a digression from the point he begins in verse 7, James again warns against sins of speech (cf. 4.11–12): "Do not grumble against one another, brothers" (5.9). "Grumble" (στενάζω, *stenazo*) refers to groaning, sighing, or "whining" (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 228) (cf. Mark 7.34; Rom 8.23; 2 Cor 5.2, 4; Heb 13.17). The reason for their grumbling is not specified and suggestions include a projection of frustrations with the landlords onto each other, disagreements about how to respond to the oppression, blaming one another for their problems, or accusations to avoid the problems themselves (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 228).

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James is specific about the consequences of their grumbling: "so that you may not be judged" by "the Judge [who] is standing at the door" (v. 9). In the context of verses 1–11, we might call this "the other side of judgment." Comforted as they should have been by James's assurance that their oppressors would be judged (vv. 1–6), the believers needed to remember that "the coming Lord is also the judge of the Christian" (Davids 1982, 185).

Examples to Emulate

In verses 10–11, James points to two examples of patience and endurance. He begins with "the prophets," summarizing their experience with a phrase best translated as in the ESV: "an example of suffering and patience" (*makrothymia*) (v. 10). His allusion reminds us of Jeremiah, who suffered at the hands of his fellow Israelites (cf. Jer 35–38), and Isaiah, whom Jewish tradition asserted had died as a martyr by being sawn in two (cf. Heb 11.37).[1]

In an exhortation that is both realistic and necessary, James urges his readers who, like the prophets, were suffering for their faith, to also be like them in their response. As Moo writes, "Doing God's will, James is suggesting, will often lead to suffering. What is needed is a willingness to bear up under the suffering, maintaining spiritual integrity and waiting patiently for the Lord himself to intervene to transform the situation" (Moo 2000, 227).

This does not mean that we should act as if suffering and evil are minimal concerns. James emphasizes that "the prophets … spoke in the name of the Lord" with "rhetoric denouncing injustice, even when the perpetrator was the king. They always, however, stopped short of violent reprisal or inviting revolution" (Blomberg and Kamell 2008, 229; citing Christopher Church). They practiced what Elsa Tamez calls "militant patience," waiting on the Lord's promises, but also actively working for his reign and denouncing what was not in harmony with his will (cf. Tamez 2002, 43–46).

James's second example is Job, whose "steadfastness," or "endurance" (NIV; *hypomonē*), revealed "the purpose [τέλος, *telos*] of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful" (v. 11). His point has been complicated by misunderstandings of the word "blessed" and use of the word "patience" to translate *hypomonē* in the KJV and ASV. Regarding the former, the practice of various translations notwithstanding, "blessed" (μακάριος, *makarios*) in Scripture is not a synonym for "happy" as generally understood. "The latter speaks to the state of our emotions; the former to the objective state of our relationship with God" (Moo 2000, 227; cf. Jas 1.12; see previous discussion here).

[1] According to later Jewish writings, including the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, *The Lives of the Prophets*, and *The Martyrdom of Isaiah*, when Isaiah told King Hezekiah that his wicked son Manasseh would lead the nation into apostasy, he and some other prophets were forced to flee to a mountain where a false prophet betrayed him and he was arrested and later sawn in half by orders of Manasseh (Trafton 1992, 507). See also Justin's *Dialogue* 120. To read the *Lives* and *Martyrdom*, see Charlesworth 1985, 143–176, 379–399.

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Regarding the translation of *hypomonē,* the observant reader of Job's direct statements to and about God may well question his patience (longsuffering); he wanted, nay, *demanded* to know what he had done to bring about his trials (cf. Job 9.30–33; 13.1–3, 20–28). But he *endured*, retaining his faith and integrity throughout the ordeal (cf. Job 1.22; 2.10; 13.15; 42.8). As noted by Blomberg and Kamell (2008, 229), in the centuries prior to James, "Second Temple Jewish literature expands on the suffering of Job, claiming that it lasted for many years before God restored him, so that he becomes the prime exemplar of endurance." *The Testament of Job,* for example, speaks of Job as "being in all endurance" (*hypomonē*) (1.5), and later speaks of Satan as having been with Job for "three years" as the basis for encouraging his "children [to] be patient" (*makrothymia*) (27.6–7). He did not refrain from complaining, but he did persevere, ultimately demonstrating, and encouraging others to show, the patience many associate with him (cf. *Test Job* 26.5).

James's examples thus illuminate his point. God's track record shows that he *will* visit and intervene for his people. We should, therefore, endure with patience.

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Additional Thoughts on James

"While we recognize and laugh at the 'yuppies' who openly brag about their tomorrows in exactly these kind of words [Jas 4.13], we need to concede that you don't have to be a 'yuppie' to fall into the same false mindset. Alec Motyer points out that the terrifying thing about the boastful attitude to which James is objecting is that, 'it is all so ordinary'. It seems so natural to speak in these terms. His conclusion is that 'when James exposes the blemish of presumptuousness, he expresses something which is the unrecognized claim of *our* hearts from time to time.' Our plans may be less ambitious, our goals more mundane, but our confidence that tomorrow belongs to us is just the same."

~ Derek Tidball. 2003. *Wisdom from Heaven: The Message of the Letter of James for Today*. Christian Focus, 171; citation from Alec Motyer. 1970. *The Tests of Life.* IVP, 94

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"Reprinted from David Anguish, 'Opening the Scriptures,' August 12, 2025"

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