

Getting Ready for the Harvest



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *James 5:7–12, Rom. 13:11, 1 Cor. 3:13, Luke 7:39–50, Col. 4:6.*

Memory Text: “You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand” (*James 5:8, NKJV*).

In Greco-Roman times (as in some places still today), a flurry of activity preceded the coming of a visiting dignitary. Streets were cleared, shop windows cleaned, flowers planted, and crime prevention increased. Every effort was directed at making sure the place looked perfect when the official arrived.

The Greek word *parousia*, which is used throughout the New Testament for Christ's “coming,” as well as in James 5:7, 8, is a technical expression for the arrival of a king or dignitary. If such preparations preceded the arrival of earthly rulers, should we not make every effort to make our hearts ready for the coming of our Lord and Savior?

But how do we make such a preparation when we do not know “of that day or hour” (*Matt. 24:36*)? What does it mean to be “patient” and to “establish” our hearts? How does this relate to the idea of the “early and latter rain” (*James 5:7*)? Though in the texts for this week the context appears to be the end of time, the basic message is so relevant to believers at any time. Throughout our history and even in our own lives now, we face trials and suffering that call for us to stand firm in the faith, as did the prophets of old.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 13.

Waiting for “Rain”

Farmers are directly dependent on the weather for their livelihood. If the weather is too dry or too wet, too cold or too hot, their produce will be adversely affected. In drier countries, such as Israel, the margin of safety is even less, and the importance of plentiful rain at the proper times is significantly greater. Whether grown on a small family farm or a large estate, the crop and its subsequent value are directly dependent on rain.

The early rain, which generally falls in October and November, moistens the ground and prepares it for planting and germination. The latter rain, around March or April, ripens the crops for harvest.

Read James 5:7. Compare *Deut. 11:14, Jer. 5:24, 14:22, Joel 2:23*. What point do the Old Testament passages make about the rain? Why do you think James uses this image in connection with the coming of the Lord? See also *Hos. 6:1–3; Joel 2:28, 29*.

“Under the figure of the early and the latter rain, that falls in Eastern lands at seedtime and harvest, the Hebrew prophets foretold the bestowal of spiritual grace in extraordinary measure upon God’s church. The outpouring of the Spirit in the days of the apostles was the beginning of the early, or former rain, and glorious was the result. . . . But near the close of earth’s harvest, a special bestowal of spiritual grace is promised to prepare the church for the coming of the Son of man. This outpouring of the Spirit is likened to the falling of the latter rain; and it is for this added power that Christians are to send their petitions to the Lord of the harvest ‘in the time of the latter rain.’ ”
—Ellen G. White, *Our Father Cares*, p. 212.

Jesus refers to the “harvest” at “the end of the world” (*Matt. 13:39*). Mark 4:26–29 presents a very similar picture to that of James 5:7. The farmer waits for the grain to ripen: “ ‘first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come’ ” (*Mark 4:28, 29, ESV*). Only at harvesttime is it possible to distinguish the wheat from the tares (*Matt. 13:28–30; compare Mal. 3:17, 18*).

What should the fact that we can distinguish the wheat from the tares only at harvesttime tell us about how we must live out our faith now, before the harvest?

How Near Is “Near”?

James 5:8 affirms that Christ’s coming is “at hand” or “near.” But, after nearly two thousand years, how are we to understand this promise?

Jesus described the coming kingdom (*Matt. 4:17, 10:7, 24:33*) by means of parables to teach the unfamiliar “heavenly things” in terms that are understandable. A close study of these parables reveals that the kingdom has two aspects: a present, spiritual reality and a glorious reality still to come. All the apostles fixed their hope in the imminent coming of Jesus (*Rom. 13:11, Heb. 10:25, James 5:9*), but they never identify exactly when that would be. Like us, they wanted to know when, but Jesus explained that this information was not best for them to know (*Acts 1:6, 7*). After all, how zealous would they be in sharing the gospel with the world had they known that the work would not be finished for almost two thousand years—and counting?

What does James mean when he says “establish your hearts” (*James 5:8, NKJV*), and why do you think the awaited fruit is called “precious” (*timios*; vs. 7)? See *1 Thess. 3:13, 2 Thess. 3:3, 1 Pet. 1:19, 1 Cor. 3:12*.

The word *establish* (*stērīzō*) means to “fix firmly” or “strengthen.” Our hearts are to be so wedded to the Lord that they cannot be moved despite the pressures brought against them. Becoming settled in the truth (*2 Pet. 1:12*), withstanding temptation, and enduring trials and suffering for our faith (*Acts 14:22*) all contribute to this work.

Spiritual growth is a process that is not always easy but that bears “precious fruit.” Believers, redeemed by “the precious [*timios*] blood of Christ” (*1 Pet. 1:19, NKJV*), are of infinite value to the heavenly “Farmer.” The word *timios* is also used to describe the “precious stones” that symbolize believers who are “built” on Christ, the “foundation” stone of God’s spiritual temple, the church (*1 Cor. 3:11, 12*). Paul likens unstable believers, on the other hand, to wood, hay, and straw that will not last and will ultimately be consumed by fire when Christ comes (*vss. 12–15*). It is important, therefore, to ask ourselves on a regular basis whether our energies are really directed toward what we value most, toward what and who is most precious to us!

“Each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is” (vs. 13, NKJV). Look at your life. What sort of work is it?

Grumbling, Groaning, and Growing

When is the Second Coming? Why are we still here? It's not surprising that now, in the twenty-first century, we have doubters and scoffers. In the history of the church, this is nothing new. The most dangerous threats to Israel throughout its history came not from their enemies but from within their own ranks and from within their own hearts. Likewise, as the coming of the Lord approaches, "we have far more to fear from within than from without. . . . The unbelief indulged, the doubts expressed, the darkness cherished, encourage the presence of evil angels, and open the way for the accomplishment of Satan's devices."—Ellen G. White, *Last Day Events*, p. 156.

Therefore James 5:9 warns us, "Grudge not one against another, brethren, lest ye be condemned: behold, the judge standeth before the door." What grudges or grumbles against others, or even against the church, have you had (and maybe at times with good cause too)? The question is, How have you handled them? With meekness, humility, and forgiveness, as you have been forgiven by God (see Luke 7:39–50), or by worldly standards? Be honest with yourself!

From what we have read earlier in this epistle, it seems that there were serious challenges among the believers, including favoritism (*James 2:1, 9*), evil surmising (*vs. 4*), evil speaking toward one another (*3:10, 4:11*), envy (*3:14*), quarrels (*4:1*), and worldliness (*vss. 4, 13, 14*). Consistently, James directs us to deep solutions to these problems: faith (*James 1:3, 6*), "the implanted word" (*vs. 21, NKJV*), beholding "the law of liberty" (*James 1:25, 2:12, NKJV*), single-mindedness and godly wisdom (*James 3:13, 17*), grace (*James 4:6*), and clean hands and a pure heart (*vs. 8*). He also insists that there be outward expressions of God's inward workings (*James 2:14–26*), including visiting the afflicted and forgotten (*James 1:27*), showing mercy (*James 2:13*), and sowing peace rather than discord (*James 3:18*).

Ultimately, we are accountable to God; the One to whom we must give account is the Lord who is the Judge and who will give to everyone according to his or her work.

As we wait for the Lord's return, what are positive ways you can encourage and uplift others? Why is it important that you do so?

Models of Patient Endurance

Read James 5:10, 11. What do Job and the prophets have in common? Why do you think these examples are highlighted? What personal lessons can we take away from these stories for ourselves amid our own trials?

The prophets of Israel were faithful in preaching the Word of the Lord without altering or compromising it. Hebrews, in extolling the prophets' fidelity to God, paints a clear picture: they "stopped the mouths of lions [Daniel], quenched the violence of fire [Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego], escaped the edge of the sword [Elijah and Elisha], . . . had . . . imprisonment [Jeremiah and Micaiah], . . . stoned [Zechariah, son of Jehoiada], . . . sawn asunder [Isaiah], . . . [and] slain with the sword [see 1 Kings 19:10]" (*Heb. 11:33–37*). Of course, Job's sufferings are also proverbial, as is the patience he exemplified despite derision by his own wife and the censure of those who came to commiserate with him. What set these heroes of faith and many others apart from the normal or average follower of God? James mentions several qualities: patience, endurance, and, above all, hope and trust in God.

One of the attributes is "patience" (*makrothymias*), also translated as "longsuffering" or "forbearance." It refers to the capacity to stand up under difficult circumstances and trials, to weather whatever life (or the devil!) throws at us. The prophets endured all their suffering for the Word of God *patiently* (*James 5:10*). This word is used frequently in the New Testament, including in a reference to Abraham waiting "patiently" during his many years of sojourning for God to fulfill His promise to give him a son (*Heb. 6:12, 15*). It also describes Jesus bearing up patiently through all His sufferings and death on the cross (*2 Pet. 3:15*).

Endurance (*hypomonē*), on the other hand, focuses on the end goal of this process, looking forward to the finish line. Job is put forward as the epitome of this quality. Despite all he suffered, Job looked steadfastly toward the final vindication he expected to receive (*Job 14:13–15, 19:23–27*).

What are you struggling with now? What have you prayed for that has not yet come? How often have you even felt a sense of hopelessness? Think through the trials of some of the Bible characters listed above (or others); imagine how helpless they must have felt at times. What can you draw from their suffering that could help you work through your own?

Transparent as the Sunlight

Read James 5:12. Commentators have puzzled over why James seems to make such a major issue out of swearing solemn oaths. Even if the intent were to prohibit all speech of this kind, why would it seem to be urged as important “above all” that he has spoken about in this chapter or perhaps in the entire letter? Is it really that big of an issue? We need to keep in mind what we have seen throughout our study of this epistle: that James is not content with a superficial faith or form of religion, despite the caricatures of him that we sometimes hear. James is thoroughly gospel-oriented, so much so that he sets standards too high for us to reach without God’s forgiving and empowering grace. Our words reveal what is in our hearts: “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (*Matt. 12:34, NKJV*). The theology of James is permeated with the thinking of Jesus, who commanded us: “Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God’s throne; nor by the earth; for it is his footstool; neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King” (*Matt. 5:34, 35*). Some people apparently even placed the hairs of their head in pledge to guarantee their words (*vs. 36*). But Jesus said all of this was evil: “ ‘Let your “Yes” be “Yes,” and your “No,” “No” ’ ” (*Matt. 5:37, NKJV*).

Everything belongs to God, including every hair on our heads (even if, in some cases, there aren’t many!), so “there is nothing that we have a right to pledge, as if it were our own, for the fulfillment of our word. . . .

“Everything that Christians do should be as transparent as the sunlight. Truth is of God; deception, in every one of its myriad forms, is of Satan.”—Ellen G. White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, pp. 66, 68. Clearly, Christ was not prohibiting judicial oaths because He Himself, when placed under oath by the high priest, did not refuse to answer, nor did He even condemn the process despite numerous deviations from sound jurisprudence (*Matt. 26:63, 64*).

Several things need to be kept in mind when speaking the truth, first and foremost being that we seldom even know all the truth, even about ourselves, and so we must be humble. Second, when we do speak the truth, it should always be spoken in love and for the edification of those who hear.

Read Ephesians 4:15, 29 and Colossians 4:6. Dwell prayerfully on the powerful message of these texts. Think how different (and better!) your life would be were you, through God’s grace, to strictly follow these admonitions.

Further Study: Read about the experiences of Elijah and Job in times of testing and their significance for us in the last days in Ellen G. White, “From Jezreel to Horeb,” pp. 155–166; “‘What Doest Thou Here?’” pp. 167–176; “‘In the Spirit and Power of Elias,’” pp. 177–189, in *Prophets and Kings*.

“To wait patiently, to trust when everything looks dark, is the lesson that the leaders in God’s work need to learn. Heaven will not fail them in their day of adversity. Nothing is apparently more helpless, yet really more invincible, than the soul that feels its nothingness and relies wholly on God. . . .

“Trials will come, but go forward. This will strengthen your faith and fit you for service. The records of sacred history are written, not merely that we may read and wonder, but that the same faith which wrought in God’s servants of old may work in us.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 174, 175.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 We all know the parable about the wheat and the tares growing together until the harvest (*Matthew 13*). But what does that mean in terms of church discipline? What does that mean in terms of dealing with outright rebellion or apostasy in our ranks? Are we just to sit by and do nothing, saying that it will all be taken care of when the Lord returns? Obviously not. How—in light of this parable, but also in light of examples in which discipline was needed in the early church, such as in *Corinthians* and *Galatians*—are we to deal with the tares, especially those whose sole purpose seems to be choking the wheat and nothing else?
- 2 Temptations and trials come to all of us. What promises from the Bible and the writings of Ellen G. White have been comforting to you and have helped you to persevere in your faith? What Bible characters have been most meaningful to you in difficulties and/or in view of what lies ahead?
- 3 James tells us to “grudge not one against another” (5:9). Yet, people, even other Christians, can do things that bother and annoy us. How can we learn to love, to forgive, to endure, and to rise above many of the “petty” things in life that can make us moody, irritable, and, really, bad witnesses?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *James 5:7–11*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand what it means to keep a patient vigil as we wait for the Lord.

Feel: Cultivate patience amid injustice and suffering.

Do: Strive to not lose heart in the face of evil as he or she waits for the Lord to return.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Patient Vigil of the Heart

A Define what James means by keeping a patient vigil.

B What are the characteristics of a patient person, as outlined by James?

II. Feel: The Patience of Job

A In what ways do you suppose the trials that Job suffered shaped and strengthened his faith?

B What can you take from Job's example that strengthens yours?

III. Do: Watching and Waiting

A How may we demonstrate to others patience in action?

B According to James, how are we to respond to the corruption we see in the world?

► **Summary:** As we wait for the Lord to return, James enjoins believers to strive to be patient in the face of evil and injustice and not to lose heart.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *James 5:7–11*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: *As we wait for the Lord to return, James enjoins us to strive for patience in the face of evil and not to lose heart.*

Just for Teachers: *Use the following discussion activity to help learners to understand the need for cultivating patience amid injustice and suffering, resting in the promise that God will make everything right in the end.*

Opening Activity: Discuss the trials that afflicted Job and some of the Old Testament prophets, focusing on what they suffered and how they handled persecution.

Consider This: If you were to paint a word-picture of patience in light of the story of Job, what would patience look like? How did Ezekiel show patience when asked to endure the death of his wife? What was Hosea's response to God's instruction to take an adulterous wife? How do these lives demonstrate patience in action, and what do they teach us about doing the same?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: *Help class members to deepen their understanding of not only what patience is but how it acts and what it looks like in action.*

I. The Patient Vigil of the Heart *(Review James 5:7, 8 with your class.)*

James gives a homily on patience in 5:7, 8 that begins with the word *so* (*vs. 7, Amplified*). This word is another way of saying “therefore” and signals a conclusion as a result of previous meditation. That previous meditation, in James 5:1–6 on the corruption of the wealthy, establishes a context for what follows in verses 7 and 8 in which he exhorts believers to practice patience, furnishing examples to help them endure the

trial of waiting in the face of injustice.

One of the examples of patience that James says we are to emulate while waiting for the Lord to return is the farmer. “See how the farmer waits expectantly for the precious harvest from the land. [See how] he keeps up his patient [vigil] over it until it receives the early and late rains” (*vs. 7, Amplified*). Parsing the verse yields valuable insights into what it means to wait. Notice how the farmer waits: he waits (1) expectantly, and (2) his vigil is characterized by patience, until (3) he receives the early and late rains. To wait expectantly means that the farmer is waiting for something that he knows will happen with certainty. He expects a harvest in the same way that we are told that God will come to “put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe” (*Joel 3:13, NKJV*). The harvest imagery, as denoted by the early and the late rains, signals that this is the language of judgment. The farmer’s part in the work of the great harvest of souls is not to look at the corruption but to look at his field. Nor is he to look at another’s field—but only at the field he has been assigned. He is to keep watch over that field, waiting for the crop of souls to ripen so that it may be gleaned and brought into the storehouse of heaven. In order for that to happen, the early and the late rains must fall—clear symbols of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, as Zechariah 10:1 and Acts 2:1–3 tell us.

Note that the farmer cannot really control the actual outcome of the harvest. He can only plant, pray, and wait, hoping for the rains that will water the earth and make the crop grow so that it will be ready for harvesting. His job, then, until the day of harvest is to work and to watch. Keeping vigil means just that. It is a watching that involves patient waiting for an expected and promised outcome. Remember that, in the scheme of things, planting and harvesting take place at the beginning and the end of the growing season. It is the long interminable work in between and all that it entails that occupy the greatest amount of time. Farming includes waiting, and so it is a perfect object lesson for the person who is tilling the soil of human hearts, planting seeds of the gospel, and watching for them to take root and cultivating them.

Like the farmer, we’ve all been given a field of souls to be vigilant over—whether it is the family circle, our friends, our co-workers, the church—wherever we find ourselves. We are to cast the seed of the gospel into the ground of each heart and wait patiently for results, “as those who must give account” (*Heb. 13:17, NKJV*). Keeping our focus on the field—instead of on the flaws and failures of the world around us or even our own—keeps our hearts hopeful and resolute.

Consider This: What is James’s solution for how we should respond to the corruption we see in the world? What does it mean that we are to keep

a patient vigil as we wait for the Lord?

II. Blessed Are the Merciful (*Review James 5:9–11 with your class.*)

James additionally furnishes us with monumental examples of patience under fiery trial: the Old Testament prophets and Job. In the crucible of suffering and cruelty, they bore themselves with gentleness and humility, showing “pity and compassion and tenderness and mercy” of God (*vs. 11, Amplified*). Persecution is a necessary evil, so to speak, in this sin-twisted world. Why? We are all auditioning for heaven. Persecution permits us, before the stage of the universe, to reveal where our true allegiance lies—with Christ or Satan. To wait patiently is one thing. To do so in the face of persecution or at the risk of financial loss, social ostracism or the threat of death, when there is no hope of earthly gain, is to endure with the epic patience of Job and the prophets.

James distills in practical terms what this patience entails so that we can recognize it when we see it. “Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you [yourselves] may not be judged. Look! The Judge is [already] standing at the very door. [As] an example of suffering and ill-treatment together with patience, brethren, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. . . . You know how we call those blessed (happy) who were steadfast [who endured]” (*vss. 9–11, Amplified*).

Patience will be recognized by the following characteristics: (1) a refusal to indulge in criticism that is not constructive and uplifting, and (2) remaining calm and gentle in the face of cruelty and suffering. Such outward manifestations of grace are the result of the indwelling of the Spirit in the soul. When we presume to take on the prerogatives of the Judge, we are not only in danger of judging wrongly, we are in danger of being judged with the same spirit we show to others. James reminds us that “the Lord is full of pity and compassion and tenderness and mercy” (*vs. 11, Amplified*), and the degree of mercy that we show to others, as we wait for the Lord to come, is the degree that will be shown to us. “ ‘Blessed are the merciful,’ ” as Jesus said in the Beatitudes, “ ‘for they shall obtain mercy’ ” (*Matt. 5:7, NKJV*).

Consider This: What does it mean to wait with the patience of Job? What did he and the prophets endure, and, more importantly, how did they endure? What are the characteristics of a patient person, as outlined by James? How do these qualities reveal God to others? Why does complaining against

others put us in danger of being judged, as James warns? What are the characteristics of God that James lists, and what do they reveal to us about His attitude toward His wayward and fallen children?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: Help class members to apply the principles of patience, as outlined by James, to their everyday life situations.

Application Questions:

❶ In light of the discussion on James’s exhortation for the need for patience, what are some of the areas in your life where you could exercise more patience?

❷ List strategies you can use to help you remain patient instead of giving in to anger or frustration. For example, prayer, committing scripture to memory and reciting it, breathing deeply before answering with a retort, et cetera. How can these help both in immediate situations where patience is required and in long-term situations where you are waiting for a desired outcome or answer to prayer? (For example, waiting for employment or for God to help you to find the right house or to resolve family conflict.)

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Use the following exercise to help learners create a broader understanding of what patience is in order to cultivate and to live out a life of patience in a relatively impatient world.

Activity: If patience in the Bible had a face, then arguably one could make a good case that it was Job in the Old Testament and Jesus in the New. Who are some of the other faces of patience, both modern and historical, that inspire you? Share who they are, and why they give you hope.