

# A Guide For Non-Conformists

## WISDOM FROM JAMES

James 4:4

Every year, as it got closer to Christmas, I remember the feeling of anticipation. I was so curious what I was getting. It was so hard to wait. I was excited...the Christmas tree would go up. The decorations would come out. The lights would go on. Then the presents would start accumulating under the tree. The Christmas program would happen at church and then the Christmas Eve service would happen. It would get so hard to wait. But it was worth it...because you knew when Christmas morning was coming. But sometimes waiting was harder – when you were going on vacation on a long road trip and 15 minutes down the road and one of the kids was saying, “Are we there yet?”

Waiting is hard at the best of times when you’re anticipating something. Either you’re anticipating something really great or you’re anticipating something that will relieve stress and pressure. But there are times when waiting is not very enjoyable. You wait in a line at a government office and it just feels like it takes forever.

James wants us to live as people who wait for the future coming of Christ with great anticipation. There are times where it’s easier to wait and times where it’s more difficult. When people are going through a hard time, their health is trying them, they have been hit with financial pressures, it’s not hard to say, “I can’t wait for the Lord to return.” But have you ever heard someone just have a lot of success or have something really great happen and then hear them say, “I can’t wait for the Lord to return!”? We know that he will wipe away every tear from our eye, and there will be no more sorrow, suffering, and sin.

But when we hear that Christ is coming soon, people often start to get dismissive. And they get dismissive for one of several reasons: it’s been 2000 years and we are still waiting, to which Peter would say a day is like a thousand years to the Lord. Or we are younger and we hear someone who is older say this and we get dismissive because it sounds like they just want to escape trouble. But as we get older, our confidence and optimism in life often wanes because of hardships, trials, and vulnerabilities that we could have never imagined. The story of our life doesn’t go the way we thought.

For James’s readers, embracing Jesus Christ by faith brought them great joy and peace. They knew they were forgiven, loved, and accepted. But not by everyone. Suddenly, they were being persecuted. The word “therefore” tells us why they needed patience: They were financially pressed while others around them were hoarding wealth (vv. 2-3). Some were being defrauded of their wages (v. 4). They were suffering while other religious people were living in opulent wealth (v. 5). And they knew of those who had lost their lives in the persecution (v. 6). And when life turns hard, you need something to hope in. James’s words sound a lot like Ps. 37 (Read vv. 1-2, 5-7, 10) or Proverbs 20:22 – “Do not say, I’ll pay you back for this wrong! Wait for the Lord and he will deliver you.”

So how do we face trials in light of the Lord’s coming?

## **Be patient in hardship (vv. 7-11)**

One of the most difficult things about hardships and injustice is that we want to react. We want to respond and defend ourselves. But when someone asks us to be patient, it requires three things of us. First, we have to trust the person asking us to be patient. Second, we have to believe that the time is worth the wait or that the time is soon. And third, we have to keep our behaviour in check. James wants us to be patient, even though it sometimes looks like weakness.

James compares it to a farmer – there is a waiting that is both a passive and active action. On the one hand, we wait for the rain to come. On the other hand we pull the weeds, fertilize the ground. We can't do anything to speed up the Lord's return. Patience requires waiting, and James says this 3x used in vv. 7-8.

The second way we are patient is that we establish our hearts (v. 8). This is that action of remaining steadfast under trial. Paul would talk about establishing our hearts in 1 Thess. 3:12-13, which has the idea of being courageous and firm in our behaviour. This sounds a lot like chapter one where James says that when we go through trials we should remain steadfast, not being moved around and doubleminded.

The picture here is of someone who is planted or rooted, someone who has set themselves down in good soil and isn't being moved when wind or rain or storms come. They are established. They are courageous. They face the wind and aren't blown over. Instead, they are immovable.

The third thing James says about patience is that we are not to grumble against one another. We can remember how Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron after they had been attacked. They had come out of Egypt and were being persecuted. When they faced these hardships, they grumbled (see Exod. 16-17). They were grumbling because their hopes, plans, desires, security, and comfort was being attacked.

When James says not to grumble against one another, he is reminding them not to complain about how each of them is seeking to live faithfully. Advancing your agenda is so inappropriate. This is why James says that the Lord and Judge is standing at the door. He will examine our lives, our work, and James wants us to remain steadfast in the face of these trials so that when he comes, we are found faithful, not acting like we are the accuser of the brethren.

Fourth, the way we are patient in hardship is by looking to examples of people who have endured. James gives us two examples in vv. 10-11. First, he reminds us of the OT prophets, whose who spoke the word of God faithfully. They not only believed the right things, but in many cases were persecuted for their faith. Consider Jeremiah, who refused to say that revival was around the corner and instead said that exile was coming. He was put in stocks, thrown in a pit, mocked, and beaten. Others were killed.

Or consider Job. Job was a man who lost everything, just like these believers. Jobs, homes, family, security. Job lost it all. When he was beaten down and lost all his wealth, he refused to curse God and die (Job 2:9), but said that he must take the good and the painful from the hand of the Lord. And the writer of Job says that in all of this, Job didn't sin with his lips (Job 2:10-11).

This is what it means to persevere, to endure hardship. It means waiting. And James has already told us these things in 1:12: "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial." But now James is saying something even more profound. The Jewish persecutors, those who believe God is on their side, those who believe that they are the chosen ones of God and are on the right side of history, James now says that they are not the faithful. Instead, the faithful are those who are being slandered, maligned. He is saying that they stand in the legacy of Job and the prophets, not the Jewish religious leaders who persecute them. The chosen ones of the king are those who face trials and endure!

This is what makes James trustworthy to listen to. The suffering is worth it. And their behaviour needs to line up with waiting. But there is one more thing that James says about their behaviour in v. 12, and that is

### **Don't be Rash in What you Say (v. 12)**

On the one hand, this verse seem out of place to us. And it does to most commentators. It's like it's an interruption in the flow of thought. Don't swear by heaven or earth or any other oath, but let your yes be yes and your no be no. These words echo those of Jesus who told us not to think that if we swore by the gold of the temple or by something valuable that it made our word more sure (see Matt. 5:33-37; 23:16-22). This follows in the law of love in Leviticus 19:12 where it warned about making oaths in the name of the Lord.

But why here? Why does James suddenly raise this idea of oaths? Is it an afterthought or is there any connection to what has gone before or after?

The fact that James says, "But above all" indicates that there is some connection, and it means that we should do some hard work in thinking about why James would want us to be so careful in what we say. Why is this above all?

Consider what happens when people get really angry or are hurt. They make rash vows and say things like, "I swear to God I'm gonna kill you!" This is what happened among the Jews when they found Paul to be such an irritant (see Acts 23:12-15). They made a solemn vow not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. Their hatred and anger drove them to the place that they spoke rashly.

In the same way, we are tempted to speak rashly about getting even, showing revenge, or doing harm when someone harms us. It takes everything in us to restrain ourselves from getting even – either in clear ways or in subtle ways. James says, don't do this. Don't try to get

even and swear you're going to. Instead, you should let your yes be yes and your no be no. We should entrust ourselves to the Lord – yes, I will follow him. No, I will not get vengeance.

The reason we can do this is because the God who saved us from sin sent his own Son to die for us. He went to the cross. He went and endured scoffing, beatings, and hardships. And yet God raised him from the dead and exalted him. And just like James has said, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble,” so we see here what it means to be humble. It means not getting even. It means watching what we say. It means being slow to speak and quick to listen. It trusts that God is coming and will deal with every evil with perfect justice. So we don't have to.

When we know that God will execute perfect justice, it's worth waiting for. We can trust him. We know it will happen at his right timing. If there is a delay, it is so that others might come to repentance. So our behaviour ought to reflect the law of love – love of God and love of others.

And what happens when the Lordship of the crucified Messiah controls our lives? We remain steadfast under trial and witness to the people around us that there is something better than fleshly justice; there is a God who we adore and believe has called us his chosen ones to represent him in a world that doesn't know how to deal with hardships any other way than by getting even. We don't have to do that because we know that God didn't get even with us; even when we were his enemies, Christ died for us. So can't we do good to others?

Patience will help us to avoid both the feverish speculation about the date of his return that characterizes some groups and the lack of concern shown by those with divided hearts who say the Lord will never return – quoted in Blomberg, *James* ZECNT pp. 235-236.

Keep your word/not rash in vows – Acts 23:12-15 – those who wanted to kill Paul made an oath