

AWAITING JESUS' RETURN: HOW WE WORK

James 5:7-11

(CSB) Therefore, brothers and sisters, be patient until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth and is patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸ You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, because the Lord's coming is near. ⁹ Brothers and sisters, do not complain about one another, so that you will not be judged. Look, the judge stands at the door! ¹⁰ Brothers and sisters, take the prophets who spoke in the Lord's name as an example of suffering and patience. ¹¹ See, we count as blessed those who have endured. You have heard of Job's endurance and have seen the outcome that the Lord brought about—the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

INTRODUCTION

A storeowner once posted this sign in his window: "Wanted—a man to work eight hours a day to replace one who didn't." This brings to mind a comic strip. A boss caught his employee named Calvin sitting at his desk staring out the window. "Why aren't you working, Calvin?" the boss demanded. Without giving enough thought to his reply, Calvin confessed to his boss, "Because I didn't see you coming." Contrast Calvin's approach to work with a young man who applied for a job as a farm hand. When asked for his qualifications, he said, "I can sleep when the wind blows." This puzzled the farmer, but he took a liking to the young man and hired him. A few days later, a violent storm in the night awoke the farmer and his wife. They quickly began a check to see if all was secure. They found their farmhouse shutters securely fastened. A good supply of logs had been set next to the fireplace. The farm tools had all been returned to the storage shed, safe from the elements. The tractor had been moved into the garage. The barn door had been properly latched. All was well. Even the animals were calm. The farmer then grasped the meaning of the young man's words when he applied for the job. Because this farm hand performed his work faithfully and well when the skies were clear, he was prepared for a storm when it broke. He had no fears from things he had left half done or undone. This is why he could say, "I can sleep when the wind blows."

This is our final sermon on the theme, Awaiting Jesus' Return. Christ's First Coming makes it possible for our lives to be salvaged from the ruins of our rebellion against our Creator's will. **Jesus'** death on the Cross and Resurrection guarantee what the Apostle Peter announced in **Acts 2:21**, "[E]veryone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." If we submit our wills and our hearts to **Jesus** as our personal Lord and Savior, we experience a new birth into God's forever family. This is our *initiation* into the "everlasting life" **Jesus** promises in **John 3:16** (NKJV): "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." But **Jesus'** Second Coming is required before we can experience the *consummation* of all God's blessings **Jesus** alone can privilege us to experience. **I Peter 1:3-5** (NLT) declares, "All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is by His great mercy that we have been born again, because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Now we live with great expectation, ⁴ and we have a priceless inheritance—an inheritance that is kept in heaven for you, pure and undefiled, beyond the reach of change and decay. ⁵ And through your faith, God is protecting you by his power until you receive this salvation, which is ready to be revealed on the last day for all to see."

Once we grasp the vital importance of Christ's Second Coming to complete the promises secured to us by His First Coming, we can appreciate what John Blanchard reports in his *Bible Studies on the Letter of James*. He found 1,845 references to the Messiah's (Christ's) Second Coming in the *Old Testament*. The New Testament records 318 references to Christ's Second Coming—an amazing 1 out of every 25 verses! It's startling to realize that for every Bible prophecy of Christ's First Coming, there are eight that look forward to His Second Coming! The combined force of three distinct Greek words used to describe Christ's Return reveal that **Jesus Christ's** early followers believed His Second Coming would be the arrival of a King; it is God appearing to His people and mounting an eternal throne; and it is God unveiling the full blaze of His Heavenly glory upon our world!

Our main responsibility in *How We Watch while we Await Jesus' Return*, as mentioned two weeks ago, is to avoid or quickly repent of any action of which we'd be ashamed if it was our last act prior to His Coming. Chuck Swindoll, longtime pastor and radio preacher on *Insight for Living*, worked in a machine shop for four years alongside a fellow believer named George, whose job was to sweep and clean out the shavings underneath the huge lathes and machines. George loved Biblical prophecy. The hymns he sang while working often had to do with the Return of Christ. Late one Friday afternoon about 10 minutes before quitting time, Chuck wearily asked George, "Are you ready?" He said, "Uh-huh." But he was filthy and seemed ready to do any-thing but to go home. Chuck pressed him saying, "Look at you! You aren't ready. You've gotta go clean up." "Let me show you something," George replied. He unzipped his coveralls and underneath were the neatest, cleanest clothes you could imagine. All he did when the work whistle blew was just unzip, step out of that coverall, walk up, punch his time card, and he was gone. "You see," he told Chuck as they walked to their cars, "I stay ready to go home to keep from getting ready—just like I'm ready for Jesus!"

Last week's focus, *Awaiting Jesus' Return: How We Wait*, showed how exercising necessary "patience" is the key idea in **James 5:7-11**. One Greek word for "patience" means "a longsuffering, loving attitude toward others." It's found four times in **vss. 7, 8, & 10**, and in **I Corinthians 13:4**: "Love is *patient*." A second Greek word for "patience" appears in **vs. 11**, where it's translated "endured" or "endurance." It describes "the ability to stand firm when faced with difficult circumstances." It's "patience" in the face of frustrating circumstances or patience in the face of frustrating Christians; which our Lord wants us to demonstrate while Awaiting His Return. "Therefore, brothers and sisters, be patient until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth and is patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, because the Lord's coming is near. ⁹Brothers and sisters, do not complain about one another, so that you will not be judged. Look, the judge stands at the door!"

A woman named Sally tells of an experience in seminary, when she and most classmates were in their mid-20s. Dr. Smith, her teacher, used elaborate object lessons. One day Sally walked into class and knew they were in for a fun day. On the wall was a big target. On a nearby table were many darts. Dr. Smith asked students to draw a picture of a Christian who'd wronged them, or one they generally disliked or made them angry. He would allow them to throw darts at this person's picture. Sally's girlfriend drew a picture of a girl who'd stolen her boyfriend. Another drew a picture of his younger brother. Sally put great detail into a picture of a former friend, even drawing pimples on the face. The class lined up and began throwing darts. Some threw them with such force their targets were ripping apart. Eager for her turn, Sally was disappointed when Dr. Smith had them return to their seats due to time constraints. She was angry she couldn't throw any darts at her target. Then Dr. Smith began removing the target from the wall. Underneath was a large picture of **Jesus**. A hush fell over the room as each student viewed the mangled Christ; holes and jagged marks covered His face and His eyes were pierced. Dr. Smith quietly quoted these words of **Jesus in Matthew 25:40** (KJV): "Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto Me." No other words were necessary; the students' tear-filled eyes were riveted on the picture of **Jesus**.

Awaiting Jesus' Return, we are to Watch and to Wait in ways that honor Him. We are also to Work.

III. HOW WE WORK

Awaiting Jesus' Return is neither a passive participation nor a lazy idling. **Vs. 8** exhorts us, "Strengthen your hearts, because the Lord's coming is near." "Strengthen" is from a Greek word meaning "improve yourself by gaining ability" or "to secure your commitment to a task." In other words, to use our time to *improve* our ability to serve **Jesus** our Lord, or to *engage* in tasks that confirm our commitment to Christ. Such *training* and *tasking* make us readier to receive **Jesus** honorably as our Returning King.

John 9:1-4 records a curious incident in our Savior's life: "As He was passing by, He saw a man blind from birth. His disciples questioned Him: 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born

blind?' 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned,' Jesus answered. 'This came about so that God's works might be displayed in him. We must do the works of Him who sent Me while it is day. Night is coming when no one can work.'" We have just one life to promote Christ's saving work. Once we die, or the "night" of God's judgment falls upon our world, we'll never again have the opportunity to make an eternal difference in anyone's life. Like **Jesus'** early disciples, we can get hung up on judging people's shortcomings; faulting them for their physical, moral, or spiritual blindness, instead of reaching out to them with God's healing love. After **Jesus** healed this blind man, as **John 9:5-38** records, he became one of Christ's brightest witnesses!

William E. Blackstone (1841-1935) published *Jesus Is Coming* in 1916; one of the most popular books on prophecy ever written. Over 1 million copies were printed by 1960. It has been translated into at least 47 languages. Late in his life, someone asked Blackstone if he still looked for the Lord's soon Return. He answered, "I'm looking for the Lord every day, but I'm hustling to get the chores done before He gets here."

Of course, being a vibrant witness of Christ and His faithful servant often involve hardships, as James readily admits. But James also reminds us of the blessings we may cost ourselves by putting our comfort ahead of Christ, our security before our Savior, or our ease ahead of eternal rewards: "Brothers and sisters, take the prophets who spoke in the Lord's name as an example of suffering and patience. See, we count as blessed those who have endured. You have heard of Job's endurance and have seen the outcome that the Lord brought about—the Lord is compassionate and merciful." We live in a society that seeks to secure us as much as possible against every possible risk; real or imagined. It's easy for us to drift into a mindset, without even realizing it, of becoming obsessed with living safely without any risks over living fully. Fourteen years ago, a man bowled 11 strikes in a row; one strike away from a perfect game! But he could not bring himself to roll the final ball. He overly focused on trying to be "perfect" to complete his 300 game. And he allowed the risks of possible failure to defeat him, as if somehow bowling "just" a 290+ game would not be a great enough achievement, even if his last ball went into the gutter. He silently packed his shoes and ball and walked out; never to set foot inside a bowling alley again!

When God places a pressure-filled situation before us to achieve something significant for Him, we have a choice. We can pray for strength and take the risks necessary to succeed well, or we can weigh the risks and decide to walk away in defeat. We then choose living safely over living fully. If we walk away we may never know the joys God envisioned for us. Even if we fail to be "perfect" in our efforts, like the man who wouldn't risk bowling "just" a 290+ game, we may still achieve far more for the Lord **Jesus**, in the life of someone else or even in our own life, than we ever thought possible. Our success may be only a risk away!

CONCLUSION

Dr. Fred Craddock, most recently of the Candler School of Theology of Emory University of Atlanta, GA, was a legendary preacher. He passed into our Lord's arms on March 6, 2015, at age 86. One of his greatest lessons in serving our Savior came while he and his wife vacationed one summer in Gatlinburg, TN. One night they looked forward to a private supper and found a quiet little restaurant. While waiting for their food, they noticed a distinguished looking, white-haired man moving from table to table visiting with the guests. Craddock leaned over and whispered to his wife, "I hope he doesn't come over here." But the man did come to their table. "Where you folks from?" he asked in a friendly voice. "Oklahoma," Craddock answered. "Splendid state, I hear, although I've never been there," the stranger said. "What do you do for a living?" "I teach homiletics at the graduate seminary of Phillips University" in Enid, OK. "Oh, so you teach preachers how to preach, do you? Well, I've got a story to tell you." And with that, the gentleman pulled up a chair and sat down at the table with Craddock and his wife. Dr. Craddock groaned inwardly and thought to himself, "Oh, no! Here comes another preacher story! It seems like everybody has at least one."

The man stuck out his hand. "I'm Ben Hooper," he said. "I was born not far from here across the mountains. My mother wasn't married when I was born, so I had a pretty hard time. When I started to school, my

classmates had a name for me. It wasn't a very nice name. I used to go off by myself at recess and lunch because the things they said to me cut me so deep. It was worse going to town on Saturday afternoons and feeling like every eye was burning a hole through me, wondering just who my father was. When I was about 12 years old, a new preacher came to our church. I would always go in late and slip out early. But one day the preacher said the benediction so fast I got caught and had to walk out with the crowd. I could feel every eye in the church on me. Just about the time I got to the door I felt a big hand on my shoulder. I looked up and the preacher was looking right at me. 'Who are you, son? Whose boy are you?' he asked. I felt this big weight coming down on me. It was like a big black cloud. Even the preacher was putting me down. But as he looked down at me, studying my face, he began to smile a big smile of recognition. 'Wait a minute!' he said. 'I know who you are. I see the family resemblance now. You are a child of God.' With that he slapped me across the rump and said, 'Boy, you've got a great inheritance. Go and claim it.'" [Ben had committed his heart to Christ at age 10 and now believed **Jesus** thought him good enough to serve Him with his life.]

This old man looked across the table and said, "Those were the most important words anybody ever said to me, and I've never forgotten them." With that, he smiled, shook hands with Craddock and his wife, and moved on to greet the patrons at another table. As he walked away, Craddock – a native Tennessean himself – remembered from his studies of Tennessee history that on two occasions the people of Tennessee had elected to the office of Governor men born out of wedlock. One of them was a man named Ben Hooper (1870-1957; Governor 1911-15). Long retired from public life, which included two terms in the U. S. House of Representatives and years as a practicing lawyer, Ben Hooper never retired from actively serving our Savior. He also never settled for living safely over living fully. He continued praying for strength to take the risks necessary to succeed well as a Christian, including being rejected by strangers who might not think of him as anything but a busybody old man. Ben Hooper, until his dying day, did not want to walk away from the opportunities God had envisioned for him, and he never retired from inviting people to embrace God the Father as their own Father through **Jesus Christ!**