

Sermon preached by Mr. Nathanael de Poix at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 10, 2009

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY AND OUR HOPE

James 5:7-11

I have mixed emotions about standing before you this morning. On the one hand, what I have to share with you has been on my heart for months. I originally prepared much of this sermon for a campus college ministry gathering I spoke at about a month ago. But the whole time I was preparing the talk, I was thinking, "Man, I really want to share this with my friends at church. I really needed to hear and be reminded of this stuff and I think God will use it to bless them, too." And here I am.

Then there's the very unfortunate side of the equation. Pastor Neil is quite ill. Let's just be honest with each other: The man is amazing. Despite the daily, ongoing battle with his infirmities, God uses Neil to bring encouragement and conviction in the truth of God's Word, whether he is behind the pulpit or caring for his peoples' hurts and illnesses. Our pastor, against many odds, still bends over backwards to care for his flock and lead this church.

Please continue to pray for our pastor.

As has been said already, today is Mother's Day! As we celebrate the blessed gift of our mothers, grandmothers, and motherly types in our lives, I'd like for everyone to take a moment and turn to your mother/grandmother/caretaker if she's present and say, "You are loved".

Today's sermon is *not* on honoring your mother. Sorry moms. If some of you were praying and hoping for a special "Mother's Day teaching," where your kids and husband leave feeling convicted that you deserve much better from them, I apologize for letting you down. Maybe next year?

But in the meantime, and especially to the young people out there, "Love...and honor...your mothers."

So here's the deal: I've got enough content in today's message to last you for a while. If I was preaching on Sunday mornings regularly or teaching a youth group series, I could stretch this message out for 3 weeks – no problem. But after much prayer and consideration, you're getting it all at once!

I don't expect you to walk away remembering all of the major points I'm covering this morning. Many teachers – and my background is actually in education – would advise against unloading this much material at once.

I like to consider myself more the messenger than the teacher. I believe God's Spirit is the active one. I'm going to teach from God's Word, talk about some practical application, and then we'll rely on God's Spirit to teach, counsel, convict, and encourage all of us in His ways.

Now, contrary to what I understood growing up, sometimes love can be painful. I grew up thinking that God wanted me to be happy instead of holy. I don't remember if that's what I was actually taught or not. But when you *don't* have the understanding that the God of the universe is holy, perfect, just, and loving in all He does, then the Bible can seem like nothing more than just another list of "do's & don'ts." Honestly, when it came time for the pastor to preach when I was a kid, I was too busy drawing, day-dreaming, and trying to use ESP with my sister since my mom would sit right between us so we wouldn't poke at and annoy each other, for the 60-minute service. If you have siblings and grew up going to church together, you know what I'm talking about.

I made Jesus the Savior of my life when I was six. At least that's what my mother tells me. I believe it. But I walked away from the faith in high school when life got tough, because my happiness was taken away.

The God I thought I knew then was a false God. The God I thought I had accepted wanted me to have a prosperous, easy and rich-filled life. So when that didn't happen, I walked away. But, as with so many of His prodigal sons and daughters, *He* is patient.

And in these past six years I've had almost a rebirth in my faith. I believe that Christ was always with me. But now the Lord is revealing to me who He really is. By His grace, I now live for Him instead of trying to get Him to live for me. I want that for you if you don't have that. It's a beautiful place to be.

For review, R.C. Sproul speaks of *sanctification* as "initiated, sustained, and completed by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit enters the life of a believer to aid him or her in becoming holy."

Who is God to you? What were you designed for? What does it mean that, once you accept Christ, *He* is at work growing you spiritually – we refer to this process as *sanctification*.

Good questions, huh? Unfortunately, I won't have time to answer all of these questions in a succinct and thoughtful manner, but these are questions you need to be asking yourself. They are questions I still ponder and pray over regularly. This is true whether you already have a personal relationship with the Lord or you don't. *Your destiny depends on it.*

This morning, I'm going to speak to the trials that we as Christians face, and the hope that our Lord provides. I will be using the words "suffering" and "brokenness" interchangeably, but they are not synonymous per se. God's Words tells us that every Christian will suffer in this life, but not necessarily every one of us will be broken.

For our purposes today, brokenness would be a deep suffering that, ultimately, breaks the Christian down to practically nothing, so that they learn to fully rely and trust in the Lord.

Before I pray and teach from the Word of God, I want to be very clear where I'm coming from. I've got four foundational principles I felt led to share with you before I begin teaching from our text for today. Truth be told, I originally had nine for you...*that's a long Sunday.*

Foundational Principle 1: God is sovereign.

When we talk about the sovereignty of God, we are speaking of God's absolute right to do whatever He wants to do! No matter who *you* think God is, the God of the Scriptures is the one true God. There is none other, and He in absolute control over *everything!*

Daniel 4:35:

*All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing.
He does as He pleases with the powers of heaven
and the peoples of the earth.
No one can hold back His hand or say to Him: "What have you done?"*

Foundational Principle 2: God's ways are beyond our finite capacities to fathom.

He is grander and wiser to a point that the human mind can never understand. We attempt to study, practice and implement our systematic theologies, and we can learn a great deal, but when it comes down to it, God is just so much bigger!

I want to share with you one of my favorite passages of Scripture. Romans 11:33-34:

*33 Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable His judgments, and His paths beyond tracing out!
34 "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor?"*

Those of us who call upon Christ as Lord are in a loving relationship with the God of the universe who created all things – including *understanding!*

Foundational Principle 3: God's in the business of building godly character in His people.

I've heard it said before that, "God is more concerned with your holiness than your happiness." In other words, God is more concerned that your life brings glory to *Him*, than He is concerned about how much pleasure you get out of life down here. I know that's tough to swallow. But we need to be speaking truth. As I already mentioned, for much of my life I had this backwards.

Foundational Principle 4: It's about eternity.

God is preparing us down here, to live forever with Him if we choose to seek after Him.

Most of us know and have been taught that we were created in God's image and for His glory. But, for various reasons, some of which I'll touch on later, when the seas get rough, we start wondering where God is. We start questioning His perfect and divine justice. We make it more about us, and less about Him. *I do it, too.*

We need to be more like John the Baptist who, when asked by his disciples if he was concerned because this man named Jesus was taking the spotlight from *his* ministry said this (John 3.29-30):

That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less.

Shortly after, John was killed.

This morning I will be teaching from *James chapter 5, verses 7-11*. Hear now the Words of the Lord:

7Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. 8You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. 9Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door! 10Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. 11As 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.

It is widely held that James, the author of this book which carries his name, is said to be the half-brother of Jesus. The Apostle Paul referred to James as a "pillar of the church." It is also suggested that the original recipients of James' letter were oppressed Jewish Christians. The Christians at this time had fled their homeland because they were being persecuted. James desired to strengthen their faith during their hardships.

Let's begin to unpack this:

7Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains.

A farmer does not plant and reap on the same day. In Israel, where James would take this illustration from, there are two distinct seasons of rain required before a harvest. The *early rain* comes in the fall, and the seeds begin to germinate. But it is not until spring that the *latter rains* bring forth a healthy crop worthy of harvesting.

Farming requires patience and perseverance. As does this life.

8You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.

I want to remind you again that James is writing to a group of people who are about to cave under the weight of oppression. They are being tried, pressed, and broken. Yet James again tells them to be patient – 3 times – as they endure their sufferings.

The return of Christ is imminent and the Bible tells us repeatedly that we are to live in the light of Christ's coming.

9Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

The original word translated here as “grumble,” is used to speak of a specific type of frustration stemming from one being oppressed.

James may be insinuating here that the cause for his readers quarreling with each other is actually *misdirected* frustration from the persecution that is afflicting them.

In medical terms or in the counseling field, this is referred to as a “coping mechanism.” When an individual is exposed to a stressful situation, there are a number of subconscious stress-management techniques he or she undergoes in order to try to establish an equilibrium.

I'm no psychologist, but at first glance and to make an overall generalization, I would say that the general defense mechanism these Jews are manifesting is referred to as *projection*. *Projection* includes blaming other people for one's own problems.

James knows the awfulness of the situation his brothers and sisters in Christ are in, but he tells them to stand firm, and to not take their frustrations out on each other.

How often do we do that? I'll admit that *projection* isn't my primary defense mechanism, but when pressured, we all have a tendency to crack and take it out on others, don't we?

Christians are notorious for back-biting and grumbling against their brothers and sisters. This has got to stop! Make a commitment before the Lord today to have no part in gossiping and slandering others. Period. It's killing our witness before the world.

Life here in America – and we hear and see it everywhere – isn't going as well as we'd like it to. Those All-State commercials constantly reminding us we're in a recession – even before it truly started – don't bring much comfort. Statistics are projecting unemployment in the U. S. to level off somewhere around 10% by the end of this year.

The truth is there will often be tough times in both the life of the Christian and the non-Christian.

In Matthew 5, Jesus speaks to this saying, *[God] causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.* (v45)

The “God is more concerned with your happiness Gospel” tells us that if you’re sick, if you’re jobless, if you’re having serious problems with your boyfriend/girlfriend or spouse, you just aren’t praying hard enough. That’s a lie; a sheer fallacy.

As we clearly see from our passage in James 5 and throughout Scripture, *every* Christian *will* be subjected to hardships and sufferings in their lives. Some will even be taken to the point of brokenness.

Instead of bickering and backstabbing, we need to love and support one another, especially during these trying times. I can’t stress this enough: The criticalness and gossip that plagues our churches today is destroying our witness to those on the outside and tearing apart the potential for the unified fellowship that Jesus spoke of. Christians can be so critical and judgmental of each other.

So many of us are blinded or just completely ignorant of our own sinfulness. We’re so busy worrying about being the “spirit of conviction” in the lives of other Christians, that I think many of us have forgotten that we serve a Lord of compassion.

I have to read this passage often. Luke 6.37-38:

Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. (A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap.) For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

James, in his previous chapter – Chapter 4, verse 12 writes:

There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you – who are you to judge your neighbor?

Jesus says that His people are supposed to be known by their love. In this day and age do you think Christians are predominately known outside of the church for their love?

A book came out within the past couple years entitled *UnChristian?* Heard of it? The stated purpose of the book was to research and report on how our nation views Christians. What was found should make every Christ-follower seriously and prayerfully reevaluate how they interact with each other and especially those that don’t know Christ. I could spend the rest of our time here alone. But here’s what one of the authors had to say in an interview:

...we [Christians] have an image problem, but part of the reason for that is because we fail to understand or empathize with the skepticism and disillusionment that people have with us as Christians. It’s nothing new that Christianity has an image problem. Jesus

himself promised that we would be misunderstood for our faith. But it is worse than ever; it is harder to be a Christian these days – at least it is here in our American context. We’ve been so busy trying to be a Christian nation, we’ve forgotten what it means to follow Christ. –Kinnaman

The research behind this book shows that **91%** of those under the age of 29 think that **the best word to describe evangelical Christians is “anti-homosexual”**. 87% chose the word **judgmental** and 85% said we’re **hypocritical**. The authors show that these aren’t people who *don’t* know us. This generation has a surprising familiarity with church. They have been to our Sunday Schools, VBS’s and camps.

We need to start showing the world how to love like Jesus intended, with understanding, patience and compassion for everyone – *especially* other Christians.

Let’s return to our text:

10Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

In a similar manner, as a means of encouraging believers despite suffering, the book of Hebrews also speaks to the perseverance of the saints under extreme oppression:

Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. 36Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. 37They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated— (Hebrews 11.35b-37)

Sawed in half?

Don’t buy the lie that becoming a Christian or being a Christ-follower means exemption from pain and brokenness. It doesn’t mean that at all. What Christ promises is peace despite the pain, a more intimate relationship with Him and that He will use it for our good.

Beginning of verse 11:

11As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered.

Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel come to mind. We consider them blessed for their fervor and devotion to God. Nevertheless, we must remember that they were ridiculed and persecuted by the world. We know now that “they were right and the world was wrong.” Yet they persevered and did so with great patience. They held fast to their faith and the knowledge that God was in the very midst of their trials.

If you truly want to be used by the Lord, and I believe every Christian does, if you really want to start living the life Jesus calls you to live, know that you too will have your own share of sufferings. God may even break you.

Back to verse 11:

You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about.

Now I'm going to focus specifically on Job's perseverance and God's sovereignty. The book of Job has to be one of my favorite books of the Bible. It has brought encouragement to me since before I even had a decent grasp on the character of God as revealed in the book.

James 5 is the only place in the New Testament where Job is mentioned by name. And as we will soon see, this incredible saint was carefully selected as an example of extreme perseverance as God crushes him. Today I will only be able to scratch the surface of God's work in Job's brokenness.

It has been said that "Few if any men in the history of the world have ever suffered so much loss in so short a time as Job."

The book of Job opens, and we are told that he is *blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil*. (1:1)

But in the blink of an eye, God wipes out Job completely. Job loses thousands of sheep, camels, oxen, donkeys. But it doesn't stop there. Job's 10 children are killed and he is then plagued with sores from head to toe, and wallows in an ever-present pain.

Job's very wife, assuredly sick from the immeasurable severity of these tragedies and seeing the grotesque sight of her husband, tells Job to *curse God and die* (verse 2:9)

But Job is a rock. Better said, Job's faith is built on *The Rock*. It is built on the foundation that only Jesus Christ can provide.

But it is just a matter of time before we find Job pondering the age-old question that haunts all Christ-followers at some point in their lives, while in their own fiery furnace, "Why would God allow him, a good, God-honoring individual, to suffer so incredibly...to be utterly broken?"

What did Job do to deserve this? Even tougher to ask, *Why* did God break this holy and God-honoring man?

It doesn't help that Job has four "friends" that come to visit, only to make matters worse by attempting to convince Job that he has brought this suffering on himself. Job's already in violent agony, and then his friends who were supposedly coming to ease his pain, only worsen the situation.

The gist of their questions to Job can be summed up like this: “Job, surely you are suffering because of unconfessed sin! If you repent to God He will heal and restore you!”

It is true that sin *can* cause pain in our lives. The Bible is clear on that. But God’s Word is also clear – even from the very mouth of Jesus – that our sufferings are not *always* punishment for sin.

You see, Job and his friends didn’t have the insider’s view that we the readers do, thousands of years later. They didn’t know what was *really* going on in this situation. We read that Satan has come to God and requested permission to break Job. And God allows Satan the right to make him suffer dearly. Yet we see from Scripture that Satan is on a very short leash. It *wasn’t* because Job had sinned, for God Himself said Job was righteous. Again I ask, *Why did God allow this?*

So after Job’s friends frustrate his situation even more by speaking falsely into his life...*GOD* speaks:

*Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?
Brace yourself like a man;
I will question you and you will answer me.
Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?
Tell me, if you understand.
Who marked off its dimensions?
Surely you know!
Who stretched a measuring line across it?
On what were its footings set,
or who laid its cornerstone while the morning stars sang together
and all the angels shouted for joy? Job 38:(2-7)*

Who are we – weak and self-centered humans – to question the ways of Him Who formed everything? Yet we do it all the time.

How often do we make excuses for God? When people ask you, “How could God allow rape, murder, adultery, and even worse stuff than that” how do you respond?”

In the end, Job weathers the storm. God restores his health, his possessions, and even blesses him with 10 more children. *And praise God.*

Some read Job and come away with this message: “God will bless and restore you and your wealth if you hold fast to the faith—*persevere.*”

But that’s not the story’s message.

Even more mysterious and difficult to grasp is that God never answers Job's questions as to *why* He allowed this incredible trial to take place. When God speaks, as I shared a small portion of it with you earlier, God is only concerned with establishing His Lordship – His *sovereignty* – over *everything*. God never speaks to His motives in letting Satan out of his cage to ruin Job's life.

Job, realizing the error of his understanding, responds to God by saying these immortal words:

*“I know that you can do all things, no plan of yours can be thwarted.
You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?’
Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.
You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.’
My ears have heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.
Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”* (Job 42:2-6)

The truth of the message of Job, as it is true in life of all Christ-followers, is this:
God allows human brokenness for His own good purposes.

As Pastor Neil has brought to our attention recently, The Purpose Driven Life opens with these words, “It’s not about you.” I can’t hear that enough.

Returning now to James 5, verse 11:

The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

God’s compassion and mercy are not necessarily tangible elements we receive coming out of a season of brokenness. They are a part of who HE is.

Had God not replaced Job’s animals or children...would He still be full of compassion and mercy? *Would He?* The answer is a resounding *YES!*

There are plenty of accounts in the Bible and even in the lives of Christians today, where someone’s faith in God ends up costing them everything in their lives. For many of them, that’s how they went out - persecution by torture and maybe even death.

Now we return our 4 foundational principles:

Foundational Principle 1: God is sovereign.

God wrote, directed and is starring in this gift called “life.” It’s all *by* Him, *for* Him, and *about* Him. It’s not about us.

Foundational Principle 2: God's ways are beyond our finite capacities to fathom.

Is God still a loving God when He allows or even sends dreadful circumstances into our lives? Just because He doesn't love us like we want Him to, as a parent with a child, doesn't mean that He's not compassionate. His nature is compassionate.

God has a purpose in all He does and vows to keep the best interests of His people in mind. But how He accomplishes this is out of our realm of reasoning. His ways are too incredible for us to understand.

Foundational Principle 3: God's in the business of building godly character in His people.

Again, God is more concerned with your holiness than your happiness. Trials befall every single person who has ever and will ever walk the earth. When the testing of your faith comes, whether you're just coming out of it, in it at this *very moment*, or are just getting ready to go through it, remember that God's people never suffer in vain. God uses the painful stuff in our lives to reconstruct us into vessels that He can use.

We are not a holy people by nature. Nor can we work towards our holiness by our own merit. It is a gift of grace. Philippians 2:13:

13for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose.

Foundational Principle 4: It's about eternity.

2 Corinthians 4:17 says:

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

It is only by believing in Jesus, and that He died with the weight of our sins on His shoulders, that ensures that *all* of our sufferings are an investment in the future glory we will have with God in heaven.

This life isn't it. What happens down here is not what it's all about. It's just the beginning. Every one of us is a work-in-progress. It can get hot and nasty down here, but we weren't built to last down in this world. This is just the "test zone." *Earth is the workshop. Heaven is the showroom.*

If life's stickin' it to you right now, or you're still embittered by difficult experiences from your past, I pray that you let it go and give it to God. Trust in Him, and let Him use it for your good.

Friends...in this life you will face adversity. God may even break you. I hope and pray for you that like Job, the testing of your faith will prove, refine and strengthen your love for the Lord, as He draws you closer to Him.

I would like to close by reading a passage from John Piper's book, The Misery of Job and the Mercy of God:

*And now come, broken, to the cross,
Where Christ embraced all human loss,
And let us bow before the throne
Of God, who gives and takes His own,
And promises - whatever toll
He takes - to satisfy our soul.
Come learn the lesson of the rod:
The treasure that we have in God.
He is not poor nor much enticed
Who loses everything but Christ.*