

# COMPASSION FATIGUE

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Compassion fatigue is a newer term that describes a human's limited capacity to exhibit compassion in comparison to the countless news stories and real life tragedies with which we are bombarded.

Due to isolation and increased relational and financial strain, our hearts are already eerily close to capacity. Thus, there is only limited remaining space to process the rest of reality. Horrible acts of racism, children ravaged by starvation, sky-rocketing unemployment rates, the details of a new virus, and countless other realities compete for the limited amounts of compassion we have remaining.

As a mother, on a very small scale, I wrestle with the tension of having three very different sons with three very different sets of gifts, challenges, and opportunities to love. While I mean it when I tell them, "There is a room in my heart just for you," I also know that those rooms are small, cramped and insufficient to meet their needs, let alone the needs of others around me.

Long before the term was coined, compassion fatigue was a reality. Even in the early church, long before i-phones pinged with updates of COVID numbers and news of natural disasters, followers of Christ wrestled with a limited capacity for compassion and patience.

Living in a world that was increasingly unjust and unfair to those who proclaimed faith in the resurrected Christ, the early church was growing weary and impatient toward one another. They were wanting to take matters into their own hands or to prematurely judge rather than patiently wait for the Lord whose return they were certain was imminent.

Closing out his letter to the church, James exhorts its members to endure unjust suffering, exercising patience towards one another and leaving room for God, the ultimate and final Judge, to execute a lasting justice in his second coming.

*Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord...As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful. James 5:7 & 10-11.*

Pointing to Job who wrestled honestly but faithfully leaned into the Lord, James reminds his audience that God's end game is clear even when his ways are dark and mysterious. They had heard of Job and by reading his story, they had seen that the ends of God's ways are always marked by his merciful, compassionate character. James invites them beyond hearing and seeing into experiencing such a reality for themselves.

The incredibly good news is that our God does not experience compassion fatigue. If his heart were chambered (speaking anthropomorphically), it would be infinitely-chambered as compared to our measly four-chambered hearts.

James uses two unique words in verse 11. The first, *polusplagchnos* (translated compassionate above), is used only here in the entire New Testament. Literally translated, it means many-boweled. While that conjures strange images to our modern brains, we must understand that in the time of the early church, compassion was thought to come from the bowels (think of that feeling that we experience when we hear terrible news about someone we love). To say that God is many-boweled is like saying God has a many-chambered heart, capable of full and unending affection.

The second word, *oiktirmón*, translated merciful above, is only used in two places in the entire New Testament: here and twice in Luke 6. It literally means exhibiting visceral compassion, deep pity, and lament. It is a spirit of compassion so deep that the entire body is moved along with it.

While James could not predict the specific outcomes of the specific circumstances of his audience, he could whole-heartedly proclaim any and every outcome would issue forth from the many-chambered, infinitely-compassionate heart of God.

In a world stretched thin and wearied by compassion fatigue, believers can take solace and strength for continued compassion from the inexhaustible heart of God. When our hearts are crowded, we can empty them confidently at his feet and make space for a God-enabled compassion towards those around us.