

## A Faith That Works: Blessed Endurance

James 1:12-18

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on June 14, 2020

### Introduction

- ❖ Last week we began a new sermon series in the book of James. We talked about the role of trials in the Christian life, and how God purposefully places them along the path of our discipleship to test us. **In other words, all the various difficulties in life – the opponents we face, the tragedies we experience, the challenges we endure – these trials are all intended to test us like gold in a furnace.**
  - After the dross is burned away, what comes out of the furnace of our trials should be purer, stronger, and more precious than what went in. That's why our Heavenly Father puts his children through difficult seasons of life – so that we come out of them with a purer, stronger faith and looking more like our precious Lord and Savior.
  
- ❖ This morning, in our text, James continues the conversation on trials. He already made the argument in v2 that trials are inevitable. **That it's a matter of *when* and not *whether* you'll face them. But now the question is *how* – how will we endure these trials when they come?** How are we going to stand up under them and not be crushed by their heavy weight and pressure?
  - I think we can all think of examples of those we know who were once professing Christians. They claimed to believe in Jesus, to be his followers – but after experiencing a tragic loss or prolonged suffering, they were disappointed with God and grew disillusioned. And now they no longer believe in him anymore. We've witnessed this pattern before. We've seen how trials can break you.
  
- ❖ So it's imperative that we understand how to endure them – how to remain steadfast under trials. That's our focus this morning. **We're going to talk about how to maintain a blessed endurance, about how to endure our trials – not just with white-knuckles and gritted teeth – but with true sustaining joy.** That's not just endurance but a blessed endurance.
  - I think blessed endurance is such an important virtue to emphasize because we are living in a day and age where it's rarely cultivated. **This is an impulsive, consumer-driven culture where we've got to have it now.** We demand efficiency and immediacy. I can't even wait two days for my package to arrive. I need Prime Now!
    - That's the world we live in. Where we demand to have everything now without having to wait or suffer for it. **Endurance is not a highly celebrated or cultivated virtue.** That's why we need to talk about it today.
  
- ❖ **What we'll see James teach in today's passage is that – blessed endurance is maintained as we better understand the nature of our trials in light of the God who ordains them.** We're going to see, as we go through vv12-18, that (1) every trial is an occasion for blessed joy, (2) every trial is a threat to fall into temptation, and (3) every trial is ultimately a good and perfect gift from above.

## Every Trial is an Occasion for Blessed Joy

- ❖ The first thing we need to understand about the nature of trials is that every trial is an occasion for blessed joy. **Though the trial itself can be painful and filled with deep sorrow, the occasion of meeting that trial can be an experience of sustaining, persevering joy.** The kind of joy that serves as a refuge and stronghold for those trying to weather a terrifying storm. I know we touched on this idea last week, but it's so important that we need to stress it again – just as James stressed the idea twice in vv2 and 12.
  
- ❖ Let me read v12 again, “*Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.*” The James who wrote this letter is commonly identified as the half-brother of Jesus, among the sons and daughters subsequently born to Joseph and Mary. So as one so close to Jesus, it's no surprise that James would offer a beatitude similar to what his older brother preached in his famous Sermon on the Mount.
  - **The word for blessed (*makarios*) can literally be translated as “happy”.** But few English translations do that (either here or in the Sermon on the Mount) because the word “happy” can be misleading. **Ordinary happiness is understood to be circumstantial and fleeting. It describes a subjective felt experience.**
    - But if that's the kind of blessedness we read into v12 – if we give the impression that Christians ought to feel a subjective happiness while going through fiery trials – then we shouldn't be surprised at an alarming rate of people abandoning the faith. It would seem as if the God of Scripture is insensitive to our pain. Telling us to simply cheer up and get to together.
  
- ❖ That's why we don't use the word *happy*. Happy puts the emphasis in the wrong place. It focuses on how I feel about myself and my situation. **But the word *makarios* is not focused on how we assess ourselves – but on how God assesses us and our situation.** That's why most English translations use the word *blessed*. We're talking about an objective blessedness and not a subjective happiness.
  - **The point is not about how happy you feel when going through a trial. It's about how God feels towards you while he puts you through that trial.** James is suggesting that your endurance through trials is proof positive that God feels a great love for you. That's why – even though the world looks at your life unraveling and coming apart and considers you cursed – God looks at you and calls you blessed. It's an objective declaration by God that remains true, even if you don't feel it right now.
  
- ❖ **So again, I stress this point – because James does – and because I don't want any of you to get the impression that biblical Christianity tries to minimize or deny your pain and suffering.** If you're going through a trial right now, feel the freedom to cry out to God. To lament your situation. James is not telling you to buck up and put a smile on your face. He's alluding to the same kind of joy in trials that the Apostle Paul spoke of in 2 Corinthians 6:10 where he describes himself as “*sorrowful, yet always rejoicing.*”

- ❖ Friends, that blessed paradox of being “sorrowful yet always rejoicing” is not some kind of unattainable goal reserved for the super-spiritual. **What v12 is saying is that no matter how difficult your trials, there is a joy that you can experience that runs deeper than ordinary happiness and is rooted – not in what you can see – but in what you can believe.** By faith and not by sight, you have to believe in the promise of God to give a crown of life to those who remain steadfast under trials.
  - We briefly talked about these crowns of life last week. **The main thing to recall is that the reward is not the crown itself but whatever it represents.** The crown is metaphorical. That’s why in Scripture it always speaks of one day receiving a crown of something – a crown of righteousness (2 Tim 4:8), a crown of beauty or splendor (Isa 61:3), or a crown of life (Rev 2:10).
    - What’s important is the righteousness or the splendor or the eternal life that's promised by God. **In our case, James is reminding those who are enduring trials that they're preparing us for the joy of life everlasting with Christ Jesus.** That’s what the crown of life is referring to.
  
- ❖ It’s also important to remember that – even though James is borrowing the imagery of athletic competition by referring to these crowns – receiving the crown of life is not a competition. **You’re not competing against other Christians to see who gets the biggest, shiniest crown in heaven.**
  - No, the beauty of the gospel is that every Christian gets the crown of life. **The endurance we need in the face of trials is not rooted in a need for us to perform but in a promise (a covenant) established by our gracious God.** He took on flesh and put on a crown of thorns – so that all who trust in him get crowns of life.
  
- ❖ **Friends, no matter how weak you feel as a Christian, rest assured that your hope to endure trials lies – not in the strength of your will – but in the strength of God’s promises.** For those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose – you can be sure that these trials will work together for your good (Rom 8:28).
  - **But the fact is, even though these trials are meant for our good – their purposes are not always achieved in our lives.** Not everyone who faces a trial comes out stronger in faith and more mature in Christ. But it’s not due to a fault in God or in his purposes. The fault is in us and in our response to trials.

### **Every Trial is a Threat to Fall into Temptation**

- ❖ That’s the point being made in vv13-15. Here’s the second thing we need to understand about the nature of trials – every trial is a threat to fall into temptation. That’s why not everyone endures. **Instead of counting them all joy and an occasion for spiritual growth – they count their trials as evidence against the goodness of God.** What was to be a trial meant to build up their faith has become a temptation that threatens to destroy that very faith.

- ❖ Notice how v13 seems to suddenly shift gears and go from the topic of trials to a discourse on temptations. It seems like we've moved on to a new subject. **But if we were reading this in the original Greek, we would notice that the same root word for trials (*peirazo*) shows up in v13 referring to temptations (or being tempted).** The point is that James has not switched subjects. He's still talking about the trials we face.
  - But he's suggesting that there are two ways to view every challenge we go through in life. **You can either respond to it as a test or trial meant to build you up OR as a temptation that's going to tear you down.** We're talking about the same event – the loss of employment, the diagnosis of cancer, the heartbreak of a failed relationship, the uncertainty of the future – you can look at that same event from two perspectives. It could be a test or a temptation.
  
- ❖ James recognizes this and in v13 he makes a point to say that, from God's point of view, the difficulties you're going through right now are not a temptation to sin. *"Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one."*
  - God isn't trying to set you up with a trial just to see you fail. Follow James' logic with me. He's saying God does not tempt anyone because God himself cannot be tempted. **It's not in his nature to be tempted with evil, so why would he want to encourage the propensity towards evil in our nature?** He give us trials in order to mature us – to make us more like *him*. So why would he tempt us? That's not in his nature.
  
- ❖ So God never tempts us, but he does test us. There are plenty of examples in Scripture of God testing people. **In Genesis 22:1, God tests (*peirazo*; LXX) Abraham with the command to sacrifice Isaac in order to purify and strengthen his faith.** In that instance, Abraham passed the test and wasn't tempted towards sin and disobedience.
  - **Then, in Exodus 16:4, God tests (*peirazo*; LXX) the Israelites by only supplying a day's worth of manna, teaching them to trust him for their daily bread.** But many of them were tempted to hoard extra manna, which rotten overnight. They failed the test. Their faith proved false. The rotten manna was symbolic of their rotten faith.
  
- ❖ There are many more biblical examples (Judg 2:22; 2 Chron 32:39). **The most notable would be the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness (Mt 4:1).** That's how we typically describe that episode early in his ministry. But if you recall, the Gospel accounts all say that the Spirit of God led him (or drove him) into the wilderness. So it could easily have been called "The Testing of Jesus". **From the Father's perspective, it was a test for his Son. But from the devil's, it was a temptation.** And for Jesus himself, he experienced it as both.
  
- ❖ **The point is that every trial we face includes within it a temptation to sin.** Every trial is a threat to fall into temptation. And if we're not careful, we'll find ourselves giving birth to sin. That's what James goes on to say in vv14-15. *"But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire."*

- ❖ **James is saying that if a trial becomes a temptation, God is not to blame. Our sin nature is to blame.** God isn't trying to tempt us to fail. It's like if a teacher literally gave you a test, but let's say, for whatever reason, you're tempted to cheat. If you get caught, just see how effective your argument will be to blame your teacher for putting you in a situation where you were tempted to cheat. No one's going to buy that. Your teacher wasn't tempting you to fail – but testing you to learn, to grow academically.
  - **In the same way, when God puts you in a difficult situation – you can either receive it as he intends, as a test, and try to learn from it and grow spiritually.** Or you can treat it as a temptation. Just don't blame God.
  
- ❖ If the Lord puts you in a difficult marriage, he's testing you so you can learn patience and humility, forgiveness and faithfulness. That's what he intends to grow in you through your difficult marriage. But you could treat it was a temptation and end up breaking your vows.
  - If God puts you through a health scare, he's testing you so that you learn to trust him more, to put your security and future in his hands. But you can treat that sickness as a temptation and grow to resent him and to rely on him even less.
  
- ❖ **James is concerned – not just to defend the honor of God from our accusations – his concern is to help us endure our trials all the while avoiding sin.** That's why, in vv14-15, he breaks down the process of how sin matures over time from a little desire. *“<sup>14</sup>But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. <sup>15</sup>Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.”*
  - The point here is that sin arises – not from the circumstances that we find ourselves in (or that God puts us in) – but rather, sin arises from our desires. Because of our fallen nature, there exists, in each of us, carnal desires for sin. We have sinful cravings.
    - **Now James makes a careful distinction between the desire for sin and the sin itself.** You can have the desire – that's not sin – but if you let the desire “conceive”, it gives birth to sin. So what does it mean for desire to conceive?
  
- ❖ James is using the metaphor of making a baby, of conceiving a child with someone. Now let's be clear: Your carnal desires are a part of you and not some object outside of you – but for the sake of the metaphor – **James wants us to picture your sinful desire as a metaphorical woman that you can either abstain from OR you can entertain her and conceive a child with her.** And it's a quick gestation period. When you and sinful desire conceive, she gives birth very quickly. And once that sin is born, if you don't repent of it, if you allow it to hang around and grow up, it will bring forth death. It'll grow up and kill you.
  - Again, this is a metaphor, but it teaches three important lessons about sin and temptation. **First, be assured that the desire to sin – the temptation to sin – is not culpable or blameworthy in itself.** Don't feel guilty for simply struggling with many desires and temptations. It all depends on what you do with them.

- ❖ That leads to the second lesson: **Don't entertain those desires. Don't flirt with temptation.** Don't test yourself to see how close you can get without falling into her seductive arms. When sinful desire beckons you and calls for your attention – don't give her the time of day. Give the cold shoulder. Ignore her. The moment you give desire even a fraction of your attention, that's when you get lured and enticed – and together you conceive sin.
  - But here's the third lesson. You can only hold out and ignore your desires for so long. Eventually you'll give in. **The only real solution is for there to be a fundamental change in your desires.** And that's what James alludes to in v18, "*Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.*" James is talking about regeneration, about our new birth in Christ.
  
- ❖ Notice how v15 is paralleled with v18. The problem in v15 is that sin, when it is fully grown, brings forth death. **The solution in v18 is for God, by his gracious will, to bring forth new life in us – where we become a new kind of creature, the firstfruits of a new creation.**
  - This is how the Christian faith deals with sin and temptation. We don't just try to avoid desires or suppress them. That's no real solution. You'll eventually cave. **That's why the Christian faith offers more than just good advice on how to curb your desires. It offers good news on how to transform your desires altogether.**
  
- ❖ The Gospel says that Jesus took on flesh and, just like us, had a human nature. **But unlike us, he walked in perfect step with the Spirit and never gave in to temptation.** He was able to fully abstain from the allurements and enticement of carnal desires.
  - But though he was without sin, he died a sinner's death on the cross, bearing our sins on his shoulders. By his blood, we are cleansed and forgiven for our sins. And by his Spirit, he now dwells in those who have received him by faith, who trust in him.
    - **And if anyone is in Christ, the Bible says you are a new creation.** The old has gone; the new has come (2 Cor 5:17). You're born again with new desires. But that doesn't mean your carnal sinful desires are fully eradicated.
  
- ❖ The Christian life calls for continued vigilance in resisting the allurements and enticement of those desires. **But with the new birth, now you have new desires in your heart for Christ and the things of God. Cultivate those desires. Give yourself wholly to them.** And see for yourself how those godly desires carry an expulsive power that can progressively rid your heart of those lesser carnal cravings.

### **Every Trial is Ultimately a Good and Perfect Gift**

- ❖ So just as James took a moment to explain the nature of sin and temptation, we wanted to do the same. **But we need to return to the main focus which is on the nature of trials. Because a better understanding of their nature will better prepare us to endure them.** So we've seen so far that every trial is an occasion for blessed joy and yet also a threat to fall into temptation. But here is the third thing we need to understand – every trial is ultimately a good and perfect gift from above.

- ❖ Look at v16, *“Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers.”* **James recognizes that there is a lie out there that Christians can easily fall for.** That’s why he warns us to not be deceived. No matter how difficult your trial is. No matter how it’s lasting much longer than you were prepared for. No matter how silent or distant you feel like God is. **Don’t fall for the lie that says that he has turned his back on you and abandoned you in your trials.**
  - If that thought has crossed your mind, know that that is the enemy trying to deceive you. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you (4:7). And then turn your attention to the God who never changes.
  
- ❖ That’s what James reminds us of in v17, *“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.”* The emphasis is on the fact that there is no variation in God.
  - Now that summer is here and the days are long, if you go walking in the late afternoon, you’ll notice your shadow stretching longer and longer. **That’s because one of the great heavenly lights, the sun, is constantly changing. It’s moving across the sky and casting a shadow that itself is constantly changing.** Because the sun is shifty, your shadow is shifty. It changes all day long.
    - But God is different. Heavenly lights change but the Father of lights does not. He’s not shifty. He doesn’t change. He stays the same.
  
- ❖ What’s James point? **His point is that our Heavenly Father doesn’t give his children bad gifts. He never has and he never will.** James deduces that from God’s unchanging nature. If, in the past, good and perfect gifts have always come from our unchanging God, then be assured that only good and perfect gifts will come from him now and in the future. Why would we expect anything different? Why would we assume that, in our suffering, our loving Father would suddenly turn his back and give us temptations only to watch us fail?
  - When we start thinking that way – **it’s because we’re trying to assess our trials on the basis of how we feel in the moment.** But we know our feelings change all the time. They are not a reliable guide. Why don’t we let God and God’s Word – both of which never change – be our sure guide to understand the true nature of trials.
  
- ❖ When God told **Abraham** to sacrifice Issac, I’m not surprised if, in that moment, Abraham felt like God had changed. That this is suddenly a different God I’m dealing with. Is this test really a good and perfect gift?
  - When God told **Moses** to walk up to the most powerful man on the face of the planet and to threaten to kill his firstborn son if he doesn’t listen, I’m not surprised if Moses felt like God had changed. We’re killing kids now? And you want me to say that to this man? Is this Exodus really a good and perfect gift?
    - When God told **the people of Israel** to cross the Red Sea, trusting that these walls of water will not come crashing down – or when God told them to walk around Jericho seven times and shout and trust those walls will come crashing down – I’m not surprised if the people felt like God had changed. Does he really know what he’s doing?

- ❖ And when **the disciples** stood at the foot of the cross, staring at the lifeless body of their Master, of their friend, I'm not surprised if they felt like God had changed. I'm sure it felt like he turned his back on them. That he abandoned them in their trials just like he apparently abandoned Christ on the cross.
  - But, of course, what seemed so cruel and senseless completely changed in their eyes after that first Easter morning. Everything began to look different. Every trial the disciples faced from that day on was seen from a different light. They began to look at everything through the lens of the Resurrected Christ. **That's why James could say, without any reservation, that everything a Christian experiences in this life – no matter how difficult or painful – is truly a good and perfect gift from above.**
  
- ❖ **When we're in the midst of a trial, we can't trust our feelings, to be a sure and reliable guide.** It's going to feel like God is distant – when he's actually by your side. It's going to feel like he's turned his back on you – when his face is actually shining on you. **Whatever you're going through is going to feel like a cruel and severe punishment – when it's actually a good and perfect gift from your Father above.**