

STUDY ON THE BOOK OF JAMES

EXPERIENCING JOY IN TRIALS II

Read James 1:1-18

Introduction

There is a promise that comes along with our trials, and that is "the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him" (James 1:12). Our trials set us back. We struggle, we complain to God sometimes, and sometimes we just grit our teeth and hang on. But we do so with the vision ahead of a reward, a promise, a laurel wreath given to the winners, those who have "stood the test." That promise stimulates and encourages perseverance in us.

And so, as we grow in the Christian life, we move from innocent, infant faith, yet untried, to faith that is tested and found true, to a confidence in God that enables us to be "more than victors" (Romans 8:37) and laugh with joy at our trials, knowing that God's love for us endures, and that we look forward to a crown of life. This crown is not a reward for extra service, above and beyond the call of duty. It is the crown given to those who endures to the end (Mark 13:13). It is the crown that consists of eternal life itself. We have that life now; we look forward to the words at the end of our journey, "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord," the joy of life in his immediate presence forever.

Encouragement in Trials

"Let the lowly brother glory in his exaltation, but the rich in his humiliation, because as a flower of the field he will pass away. For no sooner has the sun risen with a burning heat than it withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beautiful appearance perishes. So, the rich man also will fade away in his pursuits." (vv9-11)

As much as it is appropriate for the lowly to rejoice because of their position in God, so it is appropriate (but far more difficult) for the high (the rich) to rejoice when they are brought to humiliation by trials. Reading from the New Living Translation:

"Believers who are poor have something to boast about, for God has honoured them. And those who are rich should boast that God has humbled them. They will fade away like a little flower in the field. The hot sun rises and the grass withers; the little flower droops and falls, and its beauty fades away. In the same way, the rich will fade away with all of their achievements." (vv9-11 NLT)

Though we can understand the relative poverty and riches as trials or tests of a living faith that a Christian may deal with, it nonetheless seems that James has made a sudden shift in his subject, from trials and wisdom to riches and humility. In some ways, the Book of James is like the Book of Proverbs or other Old Testament wisdom literature, and it can jump from topic to topic and back again to a previous topic.

Trials serve to remind the rich and the high that though they are comfortable in this life, it is still only this life, which fades as the grass grows brown and the flowers fade away. The riches of this world will certainly fade away — but James says that the rich man also will fade away. If we put our life and our identity into things that fade away, we will fade away also. How much better to put our life and our identity into things that will never fade! If a man is only rich in this world, when he dies, he leaves his riches. But if a man is rich before God, when he dies, he goes to his riches.

Reward of Enduring Trials

"Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him." (v12)

James used the phrase: “Blessed is the man”: This sounds like one of Jesus’ Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:1-12). In those great statements of blessing, Jesus did not tell us the only ways we can be blessed. Here we learn we can be blessed as we endure temptation. It does not say, “Blessed is the man who is never tempted.” Nor does it say, “Blessed is the man who finds all temptation easy to conquer.” Instead, the promise of blessedness is given to the one who endures temptation. There is a special gift of blessedness from God to the one who can say “no” to temptation, thereby saying “yes” to God.

In this verse, James states the purpose of God in allowing temptation. The purpose is to approve us; that through the testing we would be revealed as genuine and strong in our faith. Temptation is one of the various trials (James 1:2) we face. As we persevere through temptation, we are approved, and will be rewarded as the work of God in us is evident through our resistance of temptation.

James reminds us that it really is worth it to endure under the temptations we face. Our steadfastness will be rewarded as we demonstrate our love for Jesus (to those who love Him) by resisting temptation. “The Crown of Life” becomes the reward; becomes your reward; and becomes my reward – for enduring temptation.

To those who love Him

This describes the motive for resisting temptation, because of our love for God. The passions of sinful temptation can only really be overcome by a greater passion, and that is a passion for the honour and glory and relationship with God.

Some resist temptation because of the fear of man. The thief suddenly becomes honest when he sees a policeman. The man or woman controls their lusts because they couldn’t bear to be found out and thus embarrassed. Others resist the temptation to one sin because of the power of another sin. The best motive for resisting temptation is to love Him; to love Him with greater power and greater passion than your love for the sin.

How Temptation Come and How Temptation Works

“Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren.” (vv13-16)

When we get into trouble, it seems like two questions tumble out of our mouths: "What did I ever do to deserve this?" and "Why is God doing this to me?" God allows evil in the world – that's part of him allowing us our free will. Did God create evil? No. He created the possibility for evil, but that is not the same as creating evil. Let's rephrase that statement. Does God create injustice and unrighteousness? Of course not! He stands diametrically opposed to injustice and unrighteousness, to moral evil of all kinds.

James applies this by asserting that God does not tempt (peirazō) us with evil in order to see if we will fall. It is with this negative sense of "to tempt with evil" that James asserts, "no one should say, 'God is tempting (peirazō) me.'" In the same way, Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Lead us not into temptation (peirasmos), but deliver us from evil" (Matthew 6:13). God tests us to strengthen and confirm us in our faith, but the evil in our struggles doesn't come from God – he can't be tempted by evil and never tempts with evil himself.

Evil Inside

The source of the evil is something inside us. "*But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed*" (James 1:14). We don't like this sort of teaching, of course. We want to believe that man is basically good, and that evil is an aberration, not inherent in man. But the Bible seems to indicate the opposite.

"Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually..." (Genesis 6:5)

"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9, KJV)

"For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man." (Matthew 15:19-20)

These verses and others are at the root of what is known as the doctrine of original sin. As St. Augustine expressed it, all men inherit natural corruption from Adam. God created man in his own image (Genesis 1:27) and declared his creation "very good." But Adam and Eve sinned, and they and their offspring "fell" from the original goodness in which God created them. Only Jesus is without sin (Hebrews 4:15). Only he can say, "... The prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in me" (John 14:30, KJV). Our sins create "footholds" for the devil (Ephesians 4:27), but in Christ there was no foothold of the evil one. Only a single-minded love for his Father.

The Inner Battle

Though there are many evidences of God's good creation, this fallenness or depravity extends to every part of man's nature. When we receive Christ as Saviour and Lord, there is a desire for God in the inner person, but at the same time a war is raging within us. St. Paul wrote,

"For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice." (Romans 7:19)

It is the life of the Spirit within us that delivers us from the power of the sin within us (Romans 8:1-17). But this is a gradual process, called in theological terms, "sanctification."

"Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord." (2 Corinthians 3:17-18)

"... till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." (Ephesians 4:13)

The Enemy's Intended Goal: Death

Springing forth from corrupt desire is sin. Springing forth from sin is death. This progression to death is an inevitable result that Satan always tries to hide from us, but we should never be deceived about.

Satan's great strategy in temptation is to convince us that the pursuit of our corrupt desires will somehow produce life and goodness for us. If we remember that Satan only comes to *steal, and to kill, and to destroy* (John 10:10), then we can more effectively resist the deceptions of temptation. Hence, James made the point: "*Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren*". Keep your eyes on the end goal of God's reward as compared to the temporal succumbing to sin.

God's Goodness

“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of His creatures.” (vv17-18)

We expect no true goodness from our own fallen natures and from those who would entice us. But every good and every perfect gift comes from God the Father in heaven. Of course, the ultimate goodness of any gift must be measured on an eternal scale.

God's goodness is constant. There is no variation with Him. Instead of shadows, God is the Father of lights. This means that God never changes. Among modern theologians, there are some that are taken with something called process theology, which says that God is “maturing” and “growing” and “in process” Himself. Yet the Bible says that there is no variation or shadow of turning with God.

James understood that the gift of salvation was given by God, and not earned by the work or obedience of man. It is of His own will that He brought us forth for salvation. We can see God's goodness in our salvation, as He initiated our salvation of His own will and brought us forth to spiritual life by His word of truth, that we might be to His glory as first fruits of His harvest.

In the previous verses James told us what the lust of man brings forth: sin and death. Here he tells us what the will of the good God brings: salvation to us, as a kind of first fruits of His creatures. James may refer to his own generation of believers when he calls them first fruits, especially as being mainly written to Christians from a Jewish background. The fact that these Christians from a Jewish backgrounds are first fruits (Deuteronomy 26:1-4) shows that James expected a subsequent and greater harvest of Christians from a Gentile background.